STADIA **ANALOGUE POCKET** DIABLO IV

EDGE

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

OVERWATCH 2

HOW BLIZZARD IS CHANGING THE FACE
OF ITS TEAM SHOOTER SENSATION

REVIEWED
- STAR WARS JEDI: FALLEN ORDER
- PLANET ZOO
- CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE

#340
JANUARY 2020

Tell them please to put on some speed, follow our lead

They say great things come in small packages, and there's been a fair bit of that in the **Edge** offices this month (stop laughing at the back). In Knowledge this issue we introduce Analogue Pocket, a tiny handheld console capable of running games for a suite of beloved retro portables. We also recently took delivery of our Google Stadia Founder's Edition, and the apparent future of interactive entertainment has never come in so small a box. And we catch up, too, with Lego's modest new internal game-development team, and uncover its plans to build something big out of little virtual bricks.

In Hype, as is increasingly the case these days, games made by small teams (one by a husband and wife; another by two childhood friends) comfortably beat the big guns for page count, if not for profile. And while we've been swept up in the bracing autumnal rush of new big-budget releases like the rest of you, we ensure as always that games from the opposite end of the funding scale are properly represented in Play.

When it comes to this month's main story, however, things are different. For Blizzard, there is no such thing as small. It is one of a handful of companies whose new announcements feel like real events – and at BlizzCon in August, it made two of them at once, both of them sequels to two of **Edge**'s most-played games of the generation. We check in on *Diablo IV* in Hype, and in our features section go deep behind the scenes at Blizzard. We don't just want to know about *Overwatch 2*, or the new *Diablo*; we wanted to get a sense of what it is that makes Blizzard tick. Its ability to hop between genres with each new release – from the Saturday-morning vibes of *Overwatch* to the grimdark *Diablo* via the cheery fantasy of *World Of Warcraft*, and so on – while retaining a signature style and without compromising on quality is rivalled only by Nintendo. It's had a rough few months talking politics, but we're happy to return the spotlight to what Blizzard has always done best. The story begins on p56.

STADIA ANALOGUE POCKET DIABLO IV
EDGE
OVERWATCH 2
#340

Exclusive subscriber edition

games

Hype

32 **Diablo IV**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

36 **Snow**
PC

40 **Unto The End**
PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

44 **Paradise Killer**
PC

48 **Creaks**
PC

50 **ScourgeBringer**
PC, Xbox One

52 **Hype Roundup**

Play

98 **Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

102 **Planet Zoo**
PC

106 **Pokémon Sword & Shield**
Switch

110 **Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

112 **Monomals**
iOS

116 **Concrete Genie**
PS4

118 **Superliminal**
PC

120 **Lonely Mountains: Downhill**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

122 **Mosaic**
iOS, PC

Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for additional content

Follow these links throughout the magazine for more content online

#340

sections

JANUARY 2020

Knowledge

8 Handheld generation
Analogue marks the end of an era with its stunning Pocket handheld

14 Warm-up act
Stadia finally arrives, but calling it a launch may be stretching it

16 A new light
Lego's new internal game team unveils its debut, *Builder's Journey*

18 Moving on
The warmth of the traditional radiates in *The Other Side*

20 Soundbytes
Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls, featuring John Carmack

22 This Month On Edge
The things that caught our eye during the production of **E**340

Dispatches

24 Dialogue
Edge readers share their opinions; one wins an 8BitDo controller

26 Trigger Happy
Steven Poole holds his nose and delves into the endless culture war

28 Hold To Reset
Alex Hutchinson hasn't shipped yet, but is still designing DLC

78 Subscriptions
Sign up, save, and bag yourself a choice of free controller

Features

56 Back In The Fight
The world needs heroes right now. Enter Blizzard with the sensational *Overwatch 2*

72 An Audience With...
Blizzard's assistant director Aaron Keller on *Warcraft*, working lunches and *Overwatch*

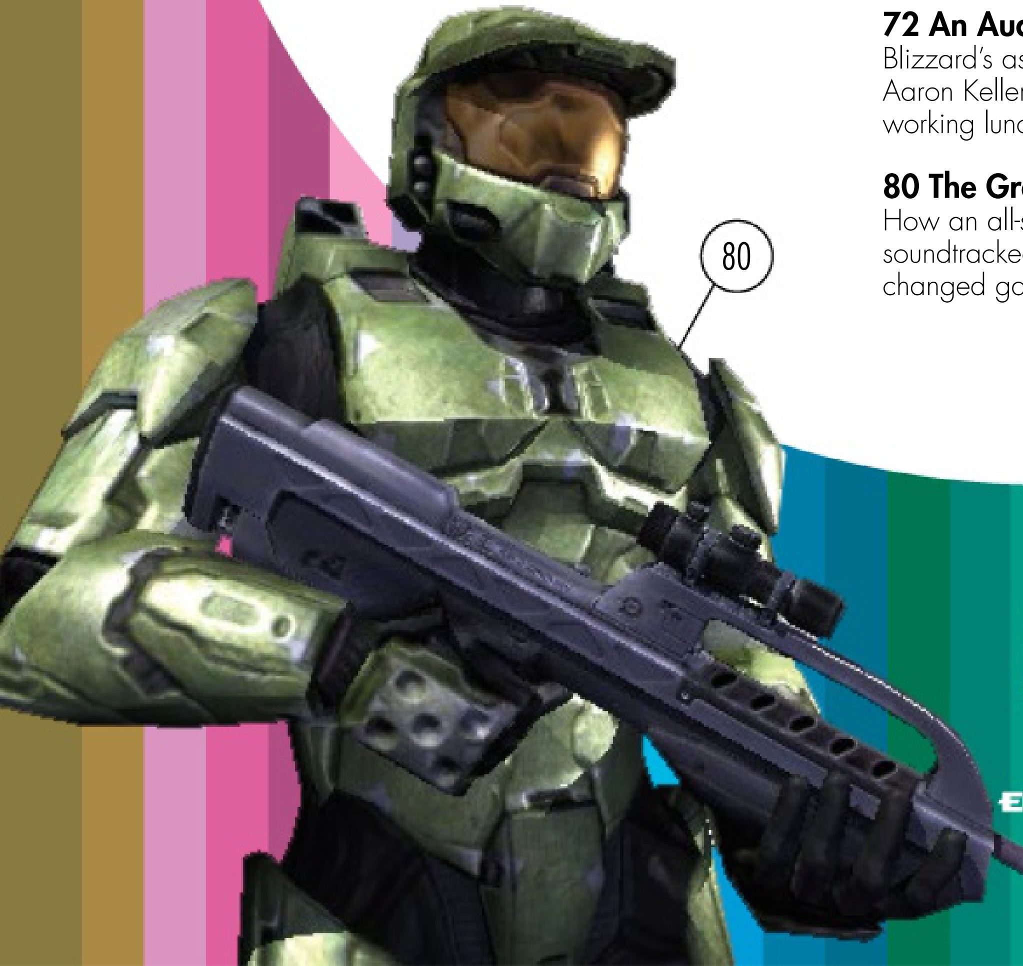
80 The Great Journey
How an all-star musical line-up soundtracked *Halo 2* and changed game scores forever

86 The Making Of...
The story behind Simogo's spellbinding pop heartbreaker *Sayonara Wild Hearts*

92 Studio Profile
How pirate software and wartime solidarity built Poland's principled developer 11 Bit Studios

124 Time Extend
In celebration of *The Sims*, Maxis' iconic living snapshot of 1990s American suburbia

129 The Long Game
Battling varmints, rival gangs and graphics settings in the wondrous PC version of *Red Redemption 2*



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Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future. Distributed by Marketforce, 2nd Floor, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU.

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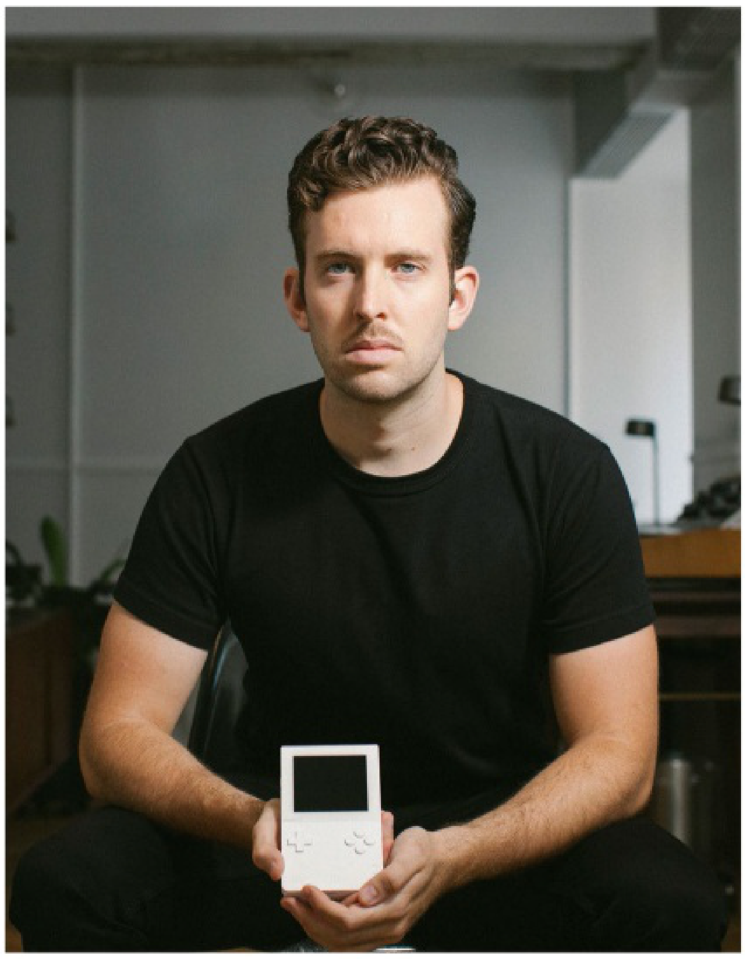
Handheld generation

Analogue produces its first portable, designed to mark the end of an era

With Pocket, Analogue, maker of high-end retro consoles, has finished its mission. This handheld, which is due for release next year for $199, will play Game Boy and Game Boy Advance game cartridges, and Neo Geo Pocket Color, Game Gear and other systems with an adaptor. "I'm just struck every day, thinking, 'This is it, this is the end of this whole category, just the most elegant, total conclusion to portable gaming'," founder **Christopher Taber** claims.

They're brash words. But he's talking about a project Analogue kicked off in 2014 with the release of the NES-based Analogue Nt and carried through to the Super Nt and Mega Sg, which are easily the best way to play Super Nintendo, Master System and Mega Drive games on modern TVs. With Pocket, then, Analogue will have covered most major 8bit and 16bit gaming systems. But there's more to it. For a start, Pocket won't be restricted to running software for Nintendo's first generations of handhelds, since it has a chip which can be flashed with configurations for a multitude of other systems, making it a single player of software for 20 years of gaming history.



Analogue founder Christopher Taber started out modding Neo Geo consoles with modern video output and presenting them in wooden cases. He then began selling the Analogue Mini, an NES console in a solid aluminium case

For Analogue, Pocket is its first all-in-one, comprising an extraordinarily over-specced display, built-in buttons and a battery, making it a great deal more complicated to source, design and engineer than the company's previous products. For Taber, though, this is ideal. "We can control 100 per cent of the experience now," he says.

> With Pocket, Analogue will have covered most major 8bit and 16bit gaming systems

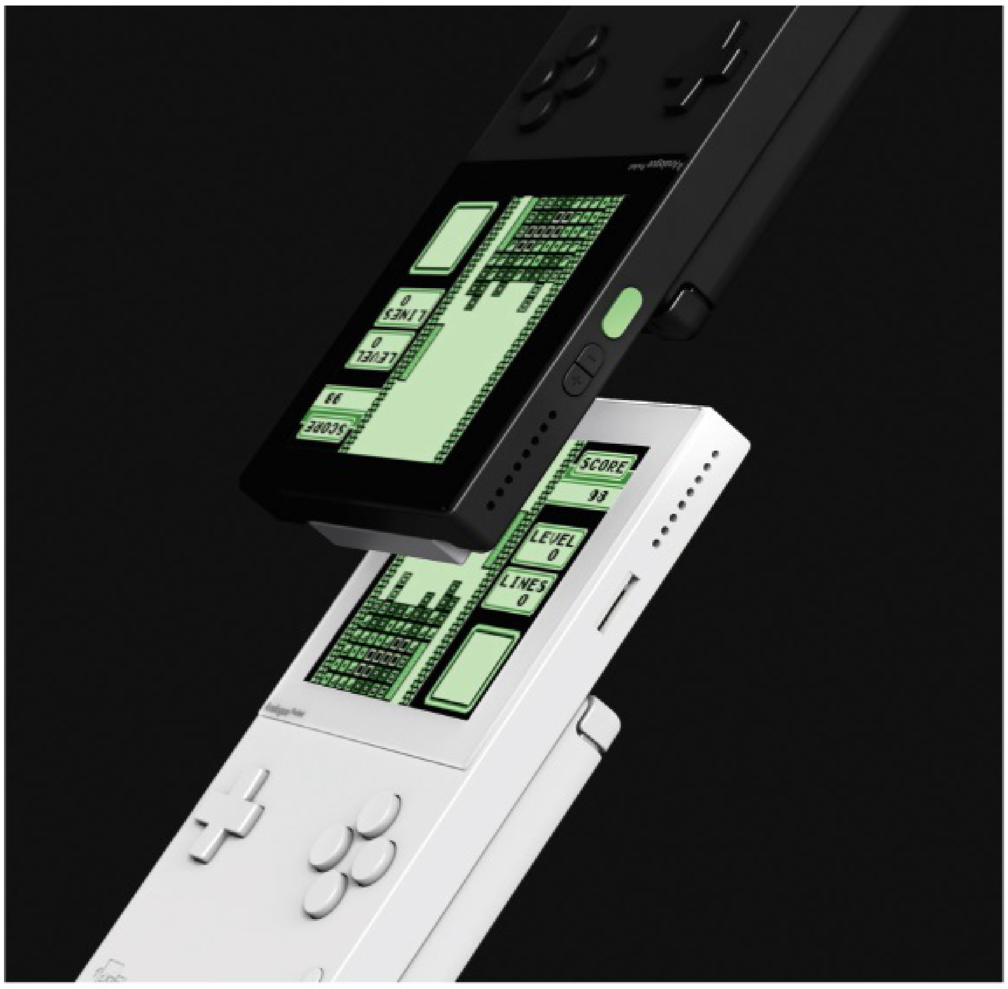
One of the key selling points for Analogue's previous systems was their 'lag-free' performance. Like Pocket, they're based on FPGAs, programmable chips which can be configured to behave exactly as the components in a console do. This highly accurate way of running games made for legacy hardware contrasts with emulation, which instead uses software to perform the same trick, a process which tends to introduce milliseconds of lag. So Analogue's consoles have an inherent advantage, but they have to connect to a TV over HDMI, both adding lag that's entirely outside Analogue's control. Pocket, by contrast, has circuitry and a display that's entirely under Analogue's control, and Taber claims that no handheld compares to its low latency between pressing a button and seeing the results play out on its screen.

No handheld console display approaches its high resolution, either. "It's wicked fucking good. I can't overstate it," says Taber. At 1600x1440 pixels, it boasts a fine-grained density of 615 pixels per inch. An iPhone 11 has 326ppi. But while this will seem an absurd way to play Game Boy games, these numbers aren't conjured out of nowhere. Pocket's display is exactly ten times Game Boy's 160x144 resolution. This means that when it scales up the games to fill its screen, there is no interpolation, no blurring, so every pixel remains sharp and defined.

Pocket continually ties its engineering back to the systems it's designed to work with, so it makes complete sense that it's presented in a portrait format. Its controls are laid out below the screen, just like they are on a Game Boy, rather than in the landscape format of every Nintendo handheld since. Indeed, the team wanted it to be portrait. "But the requirement for a certain battery life required it to be a certain size," says **Matthew Kenyon** of

▶

Castlevania II
BELMONT'S Revenge TM
TM AND © 1991 KONAMI
START
PASSWORD
Analogue Pocket
LINES 0
LEVEL 0
SCORE 93
TETRIS BLAST
TETRIS
ELEVATOR Action
MEGA MAN V
ODDWORLD
LOONEY TUNES
MICKEY MOUSE
FALL OF THE FOOT CLAN
PAC-MAN
TETRIS ATTACK
JAMES BOND 007
STAR WARS
GAME BOY GALLERY 5 GAMES IN 1
MADE IN JAPAN
THIS SIDE OUT



Pocket will be available in both black and white options. The three buttons in the bottom-right corner of the front, which include the home button, are placed to echo the position of the speaker grille on the Game Boy

Kenyon Weston, the Huddersfield-based industrial designer behind Pocket. Along with its large internal battery, the screen also defined the shapes and sizes that Pocket could be. "The question was whether it would be portrait or landscape, and we had a lot of fun battles with the pros and cons of each."

It was, after all, important for Pocket to look physically distinct from Nintendo Switch, and also from all the retro handhelds on the market. "It's also our biggest nod to the nostalgia of the era, so we really pushed it," adds Kenyon, who with partner Chris Weston hasn't designed a handheld before, but previously led the Mega Sg's industrial design. "But the challenge was how to make it feel modern."

"Nostalgia cheapens everything that Analogue does," Taber says. "I don't give a fuck about nostalgia, personally, at all. It doesn't mean anything to me. It's not the reason we make the product." So while Pocket absolutely references Game Boy, its lines are, in Kenyon's words, "graphically sharp". In fact, it looks like it might not be entirely comfortable to hold, but he's clear that subtle chamfered edges will make Pocket sit well in the hand, the result of round after round of prototyping, during which he and Weston drew up 3D models and sent them to Taber, who's based in Hong Kong and would have them rapid-prototyped and sent back to Huddersfield so Kenyon Weston could feel them.

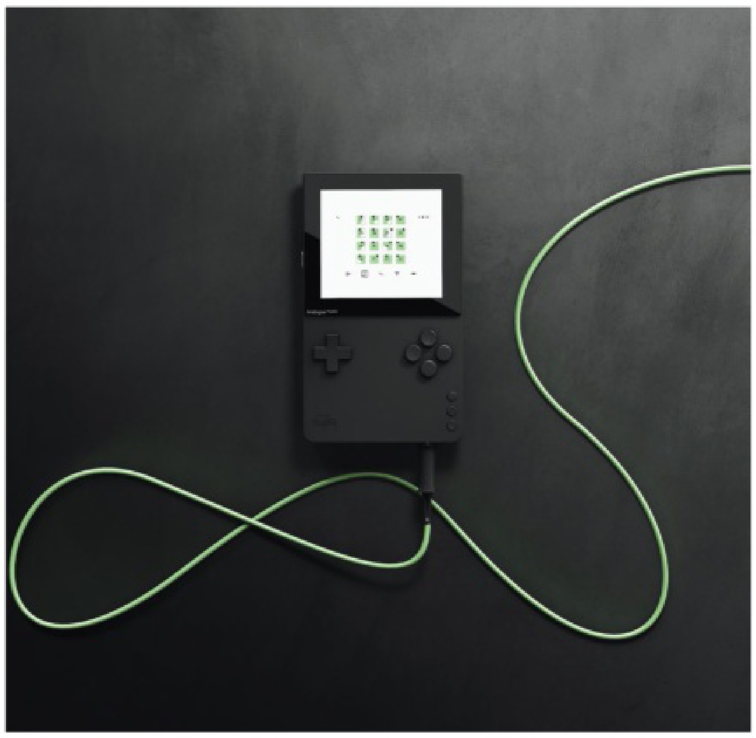
Besides, Kenyon and Weston believe that industrial design is better when it comprises simple shapes that allow your hands to learn its limits, rather than sculpted ergonomic forms which tend never to really fit hands which are bigger or smaller than they were designed for. "The other benefit of the portrait format is that your hands are closer together and the weight distribution is just generally nicer," Kenyon adds. The buttons' placements are also the product of rounds of millimetre-by-millimetre trial and error, especially the L and R buttons on the back and the horizontal placement of the D-pad. Each movement would then affect the placement of all the other buttons.

"The benefit of portrait format is that your hands are closer and the weight distribution is nicer"

"You can rest assured that everything controller related is fucking perfect," states Taber. "We would never release anything less than that. Everything in the aftermarket retro category, I don't know what's more notorious, poor-quality emulation or poor-quality controllers. Maybe the controllers." So Pocket's buttons are not the clicky microswitched buttons that Nintendo currently uses. They instead feature flexible membranes which make them follow the feel of the Game Boy and Game Boy Advance.

The L and R buttons, meanwhile, are positioned at the back of the casing, alongside the cartridge slot. The slot is exceedingly shallow, which means tall Game Boy cartridges protrude way above it, their top edges meeting exactly with Pocket's upper edge, and fully exposing their printed panels so you can see them and enjoy the contrast between Pocket's newness and Nintendo's old grey plastic design. Kenyon assures us that the slot holds the cartridge tightly, courtesy of Analogue's engineers, led by Ernest Dorazio.

Over the course of the past three years, during which Analogue has released Nt Mini (January 2017), Super Nt (February 2018) and Mega Sg (March 2019), the company has built up strong engineering expertise, as well as ▶



LEFT **Nanoloop is built-in sequencer software that was originally developed for Game Boy and Game Boy Advance. Its spare design conceals flexible and powerful music creation.**
BOTTOM **An adaptor, sold separately, will be required to play Atari Lynx, Neo Geo Pocket Color and Game Gear games**

contacts among the East Asian electronics manufacturers from which it sources its components. Taber scoffs at the idea of buying them off general distributors like Mouser Electronics. "We find nothing on them," he says. Instead, Analogue goes direct to source. "We're resourceful and really scrappy and on the front lines."

That's why he's based in Hong Kong, and how he got Pocket's display for the sub-$200 price point it's reached. Taber says it's a direct result of the proliferation of smartphones, which has allowed the display industry to reach a saturation point which has meant it's experimenting with new formats and sizes, and can be more flexible for the comparatively tiny orders that boutique electronics manufacturers such as Analogue make.

This tectonic shift in electronics has enabled this little, scrappy company to put together a high-spec handheld, and it's behind the hardware coming from other specialists too, like synthesiser maker Teenage Engineering, which is, of course, also producing the handheld console Playdate. "Teenage Engineering is a super-fun, cool company," says Taber. "I've been following them since the beginning."

And that would be because Taber describes himself as "much more of a music guy than a videogame guy." It's what's behind Analogue's collaboration in December last year with record label Ghostly International, through which it released a special edition of the Super Nt with a white casing and custom startup animations and sounds from its signed bands, including Shigeto, Telefon Tel Aviv and Gold Panda. Mega Sg is about to receive its own, a collaboration with label Hyperdub (Burial, The Bug) which will include a cartridge loaded with original tracks from its artists that will never be released outside it.

It promises to be simply the very best way to access pretty much every 8bit and 16bit system ever made

Pocket, meanwhile, will feature a version of Oliver Wittchow's sequencer, Nanoloop, which was first released for Game Boy and subsequently for Game Boy Advance. It's a clear nod to the passionate chiptune culture that's grown around Game Boy, but Taber is again firm that its inclusion is not about nostalgia for 8bit sound, since Pocket's Nanoloop will also be able to connect to MIDI and thus be a part of live music outside chiptune's bleeps, noise and clicks. And since the GBA version of Nanoloop costs €49 and the Game Boy version costs €69, its integration into Pocket represents great value. "You wouldn't believe how many of these have sold over the past ten years. Tens of thousands have bought this software and have an interest in it," says Taber.

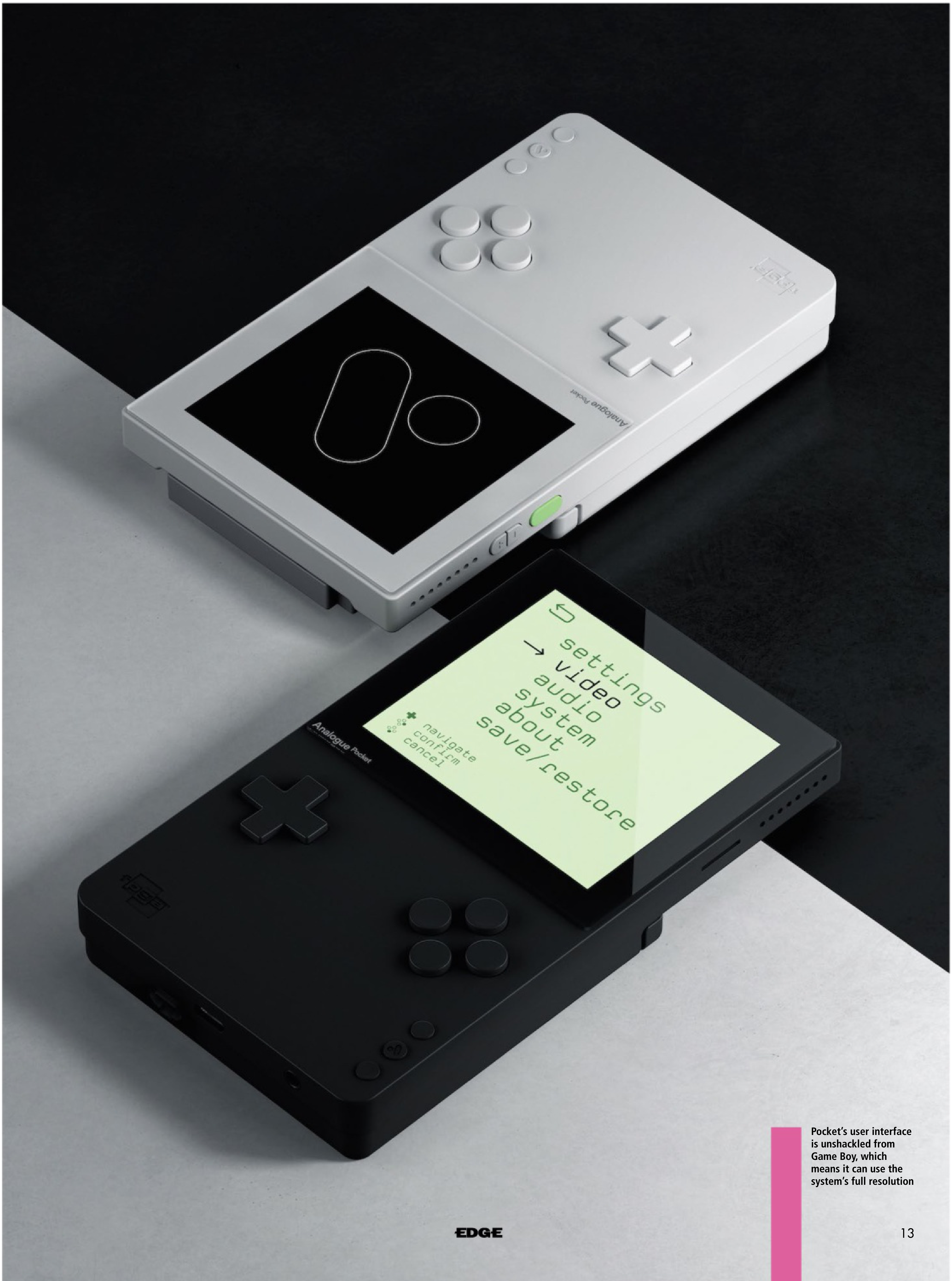
In both form and function, then, Pocket walks a line between celebrating the Game Boy and bringing to its culture and identity something new. But more than that, it also promises to be simply the very best way to play a generation of handheld games and to access pretty much every 8bit and 16bit system ever made, both in your hands or connected to your TV via a custom dock. Because why not? "To me, Pocket is the conclusion of this entire era of videogames, for Analogue and just in general," says Taber. "Who the fuck else is going to make something that's better than this?" ■

Analogue Pocket

The dock is needed to display Pocket on a TV, since the console doesn't have an HDMI port. It supports both Bluetooth and a wired USB connection for controllers, and looks good even when Pocket isn't plugged into it

ALL SYSTEMS GO

Pocket will have two FPGA chips, one for its main Game Boy and Game Boy Advance compatibility, as led by long-time collaborator and FPGA trailblazer Kevin Horton. The second will be blank, ready to be flashed with new systems which will make Pocket into a Swiss Army knife of a handheld. It's designed to serve the community around Mist, a single-chip board designed to run cores for a spectrum of 8bit and 16bit systems, from Spectrum and NES to Mega Drive and Amiga. The project is currently based around a blank board which has to be configured to run, and many of the cores are buggy and are constantly being updated. "The majority of people aren't going to jump over all the hurdles," says Taber. "So we threw in this extra chip and paid attention to the community and what they want, and tried to put it into Pocket, so you can much more easily flash it to use it as a development system."


Analogue Pocket
settings
→ video
audio
system
about
save/restore
navigate
confirm
cancel
Analogue Pocket

Pocket's user interface is unshackled from Game Boy, which means it can use the system's full resolution

Warm-up act

Stadia finally emerges from the shadows, but to call it a launch may be stretching it

Perhaps in hindsight, the clue was in the title. In games, 'Founder's Edition' can be a loaded phrase; it's often the label given to a bundle of cosmetics and currencies given to those who pony up for an early-access game. It's a way to sweeten the pill of being one of the first through the door, on the ground floor, of a building that's still under construction.

So it proves with Stadia's Founders Edition, which notionally provides you with everything you need to get up and running on Google's much-vaunted cloud-streaming game platform. Our pack contains a Chromecast Ultra, the latest version of Google's slender home streamer; a Stadia controller; and, most vitally of all, the access code that unlocks the service for us. The original pitch for Stadia positioned all of these things as optional extras: yes, you could fully buy into the ecosystem with Google-branded everything, but Stadia's USP was that it would run on any screen, with any controller, wherever you were in the world.

> Chromecast is the only way to play on a big screen, at least without hooking a PC directly to it

The picture at launch – if that's even the right word – is sadly quite different. Chromecast is the only way to play on a big screen, at least without hooking a PC directly to it and playing in a browser, and at launch, only the Chromecast Ultra supplied with the Founder's Edition will support Stadia at all (existing devices will require an over-the-air firmware update promised soon after launch). The Pixel 3a handset Google also supplies is similarly vital, given the lack of iOS support; an app for Apple devices, provided early to us over the Testflight service, can only be used to launch games on other screens.

The theme continues into Stadia's promised feature set. The Stadia controller's USP – connecting directly to the Google data centre, bypassing your home network infrastructure to reduce latency – is only available on Chromecast at launch. Pressing the controller's Google Assistant button, pitched as a way of getting help when you're stuck in a game, yields a message that the feature will be available soon. Stream Connect, which combines two streams to power multiplayer games, is also absent, with Google only committing to a game supporting it being available before the end of the year. Family Sharing, State Share and Crowd Play won't arrive until 2020; Buddy Pass, which lets a Founder's Edition owner give a friend access to Stadia for free for a limited time, rolls out two weeks after launch. Stadia's achievement system will be live on day one, but its UI won't; it'll track progress and those you've earned will be ticked off when the feature comes online. On it goes. That ground floor you got in on? It's just walls and bare wiring.

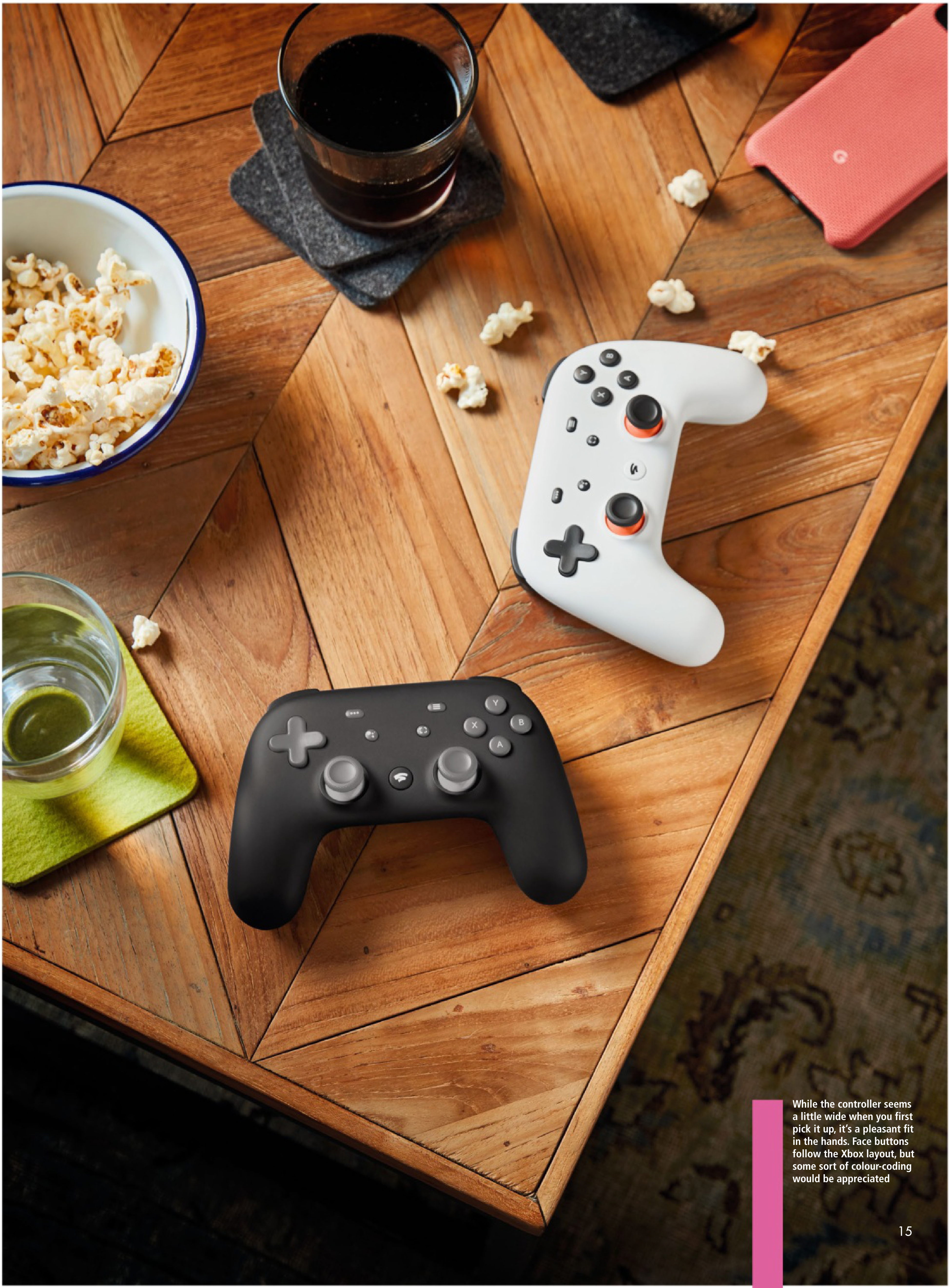
All this would be easier to swallow were Stadia launching with a software line-up for the ages. Unfortunately the initial dozen games on offer do little to quicken the pulse. It is not without its bangers – Gwen Frey's delightfully devious *Kine* is a highlight, *Red Dead Redemption 2* is quite the catch, and we're never going to complain about being given another way to play *Destiny 2* – but it is hard to get excited about the likes of *Mortal Kombat 11*, *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* or *Just Dance 2020*. The only exclusive is Tequila Works' narrative adventure *Gylt*; like the rest of the studio's work it is competently made and charming, but it is no system seller.

In a Reddit AMA the week before launch **Andrey Doronichev**, Stadia's director of product, explained that Google likes to start with the basics and build out from there. "YouTube started with 'watch video'," he explained. "For Stadia it's 'play the game on your biggest screen'." That's fair enough, but all of the above becomes even more frustrating given the fact that Stadia *works*. It works wonderfully well, in fact, albeit with the caveat that we are one of a handful of media given early access to a platform that is hardly operating at scale, and we suspect a few cutbacks in resolution. But the first time we fire up *Destiny 2* in a browser tab is a thrill, and switching between screens – from Chrome to Chromecast to Pixel then back again – is as simple as firing up the app on the screen in question, your game session appearing within seconds. While we'll leave the frame- and pixel-counting to the professionals, the only tool we need to assess Stadia's technology is our many hours of *Destiny* experience. It is not quite flawless – there's a frame or two of delay, surely, and it's prettier on PC – but it is perfectly playable, and quite beautiful.

How much of that is due to the low initial number of users, we're not sure. But we doubt that, by the time you read this and Stadia is in the wild, those figures will have skyrocketed. This does not feel like a platform launch. It's merely a proof of concept, the soft launch of a basic paid beta. It gives Google a theoretical advantage over the competition – over Microsoft's xCloud, over PS5 and the next Xbox, over whatever Amazon is cooking up. But much more work is required if that advantage is to count for anything. ■

GOOGLE PRIME

On top of the platform-level disappointments, Google is struggling to keep on top of shipping the Founder's Edition to those who've pre-ordered. A staggered rollout means that many may miss out on one of the headline features: getting a jump on the hoi polloi when it comes to usernames. With no access code, you can't log in and reserve your desired user ID. Director of product Andrey Doronichev is doing his part to ease the pain, offering to deliver one Founder's Edition to a Bay Area resident on launch day. Not the behaviour you'd expect from one of the biggest tech companies on the planet, but alas, it's a recurring theme.



While the controller seems a little wide when you first pick it up, it's a pleasant fit in the hands. Face buttons follow the Xbox layout, but some sort of colour-coding would be appreciated

A new light

Lego's new internal development team displays a more philosophical side of the brick with its debut game

Lego is not just for kids. While many of the Lego videogames have been aimed primarily at a younger audience, their overall quality and sharp sense of humour means that they attract older players, too. Perhaps childhood nostalgia draws us back to the famous brick. But there's also an undeniably meditative quality to the act of snapping plastic together, of following detailed instructions to the letter and producing something intricate and beautiful, that appeals to those of us looking for a way to escape the large-scale stresses of adult life.

Light Brick Studios is a new internal Lego studio dedicated to creating titles that explore different facets of the classic toy. Its first release, *Builder's Journey*, is set to hit Apple's new subscription service in the very near future – and is a puzzle-platformer that pays homage to the more mature, mindful side of Lego. Its arthouse style looks quite unlike any Lego game we've seen before, and there's a strong narrative focus: by picking up and moving bricks to complete paths through dioramas, you help guide a blocky father-son duo through a story all about the importance of play – no matter how old we may be.

The team didn't prototype in bricks, but we're shown a gorgeous custom-scale model of one level

"It pokes a certain area in your brain that's satisfied by snapping things together, and it's very flow-inducing"

It's quite the departure for Lego, then. Indeed, the experimental Light Brick Studios is just nine people – but the team includes experienced creative talent such as Mikkel Fredborg (of *Kalimba* and *Youropa* fame) and creative director **Karsten Lund**, who worked at IO Interactive for 12 years, helping lead development on *Hitman: Sniper* and *Hitman Go* before joining Lego in 2013 to work on the (late) *Dimensions* series. "At the same time, on the Digital Games mobile team, we wanted to set some new projects in motion to see where we could take things in the mobile space," Lund says. He wanted to create something that could stand on its own as a game: "Not just, 'Hey, this is Lego, you already love it' – but to try and add something to it."

Usually Lego works with other game studios to develop its digital playthings, "sort of because we believe in finding the right people to do the right jobs," Lund says. "We're good at making toys; other people are good at making games. But I had this background in game development. And I felt like maybe I could come up with a different way of working." He cast around Copenhagen for talent new and old: "I always believe in that mix of having people with different experience levels and backgrounds. So people who are fresh and don't really know what you can and cannot do, and then older people to sort of say, 'Okay, I know exactly how to do this,' and then just mixing them up and seeing what happens." They put together a prototype for *Builder's Journey*, pitched it internally, and Light Brick Studios was born. On first impressions, the move to internal development is producing glittering results. "We usually try to get as much ownership into an external team as possible," Lund says. "This is where I sort of sit in the middle of the team, and turn it into a game team that works with this. So keeping the Lego DNA very close, and making sure that everything is really saying what we should be saying."

SHINING EXAMPLE

Light Brick Studios' mandate is to "really try and innovate, and see if we can make the Lego brick shine in this digital medium," Lund says, grinning as he indirectly references the studio name. "We are a digital team, so we're making bricks with light, if you will." And then, picking up a Lego brick: "We would also say our bricks are very light!" The name, of course, is also a nostalgic reference to the now out-of-production Lego light brick, which contained real LEDs that could be illuminated – Light Brick's logo is based on the original version, which required a cable.

For Lund and his team, it's about celebrating a more grown-up side of the toy: the puzzle elements and creativity that comes from playing with a limited set of studs, bricks and colours; the tactile pleasure of clicking bricks into place that Apple's haptic feedback engine affords. For him, Lego's enduring appeal to older players goes beyond mere nostalgia, to timeless design that he and his team are learning from as they make their game. "The brick sizes and shapes are very appealing, and they communicate sort of without words: they tell you, 'This is how I'm used, this is where I fit'," he says. "And they always fit. It pokes a certain area in your brain that's satisfied by snapping things together, and it's very flow-inducing. You lose track of time, and it's relaxing.

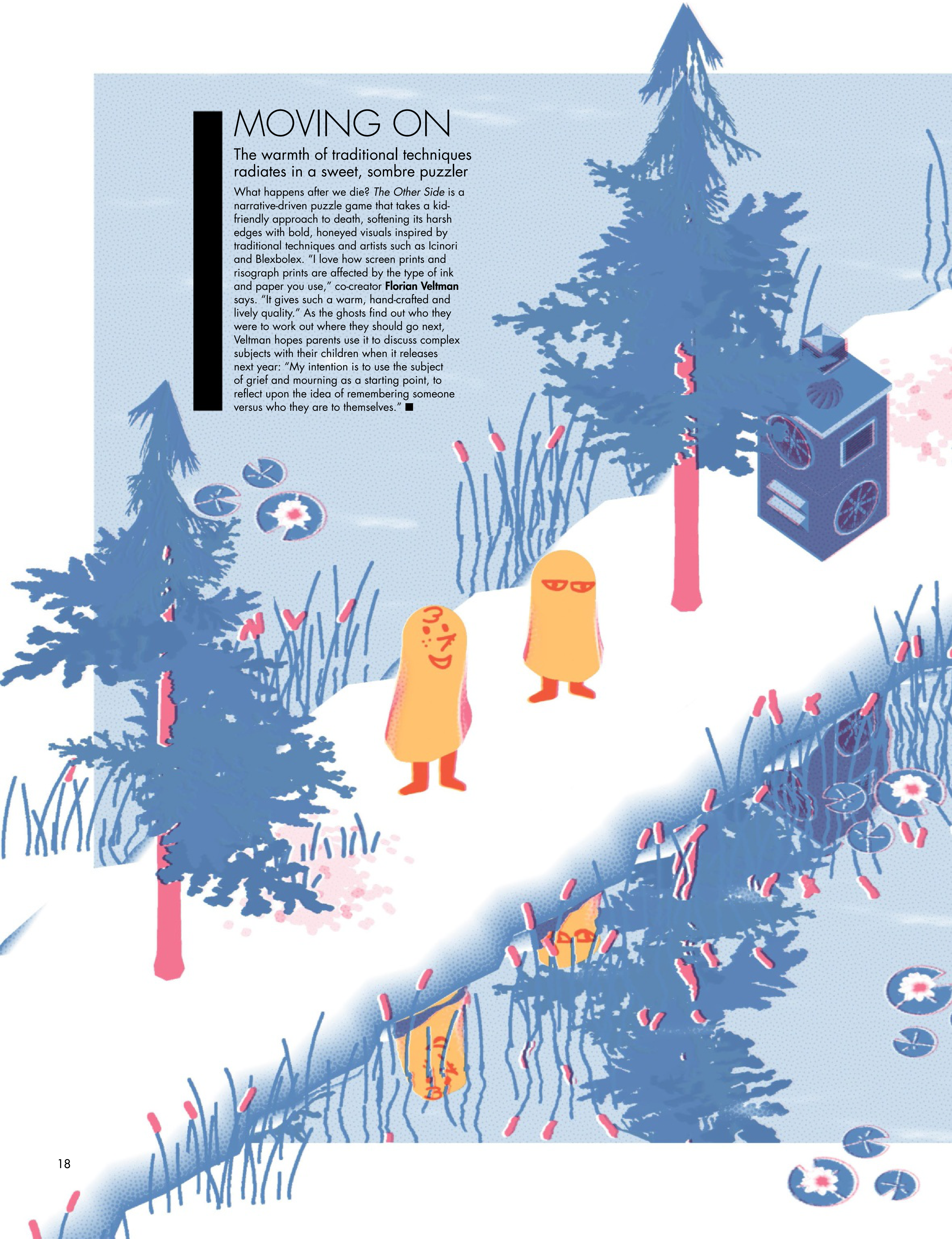
"So we play around with that feeling of models that need to be completed, where there's a certain brick missing here, and you need to reuse one of the ones that you already have in your model – take something apart to build it up again." That last thought speaks volumes about the kind of subject matter Lego games have yet to explore, and that *Builder's Journey* may well do: Light Brick Studios' potential is starting to click into place. ■

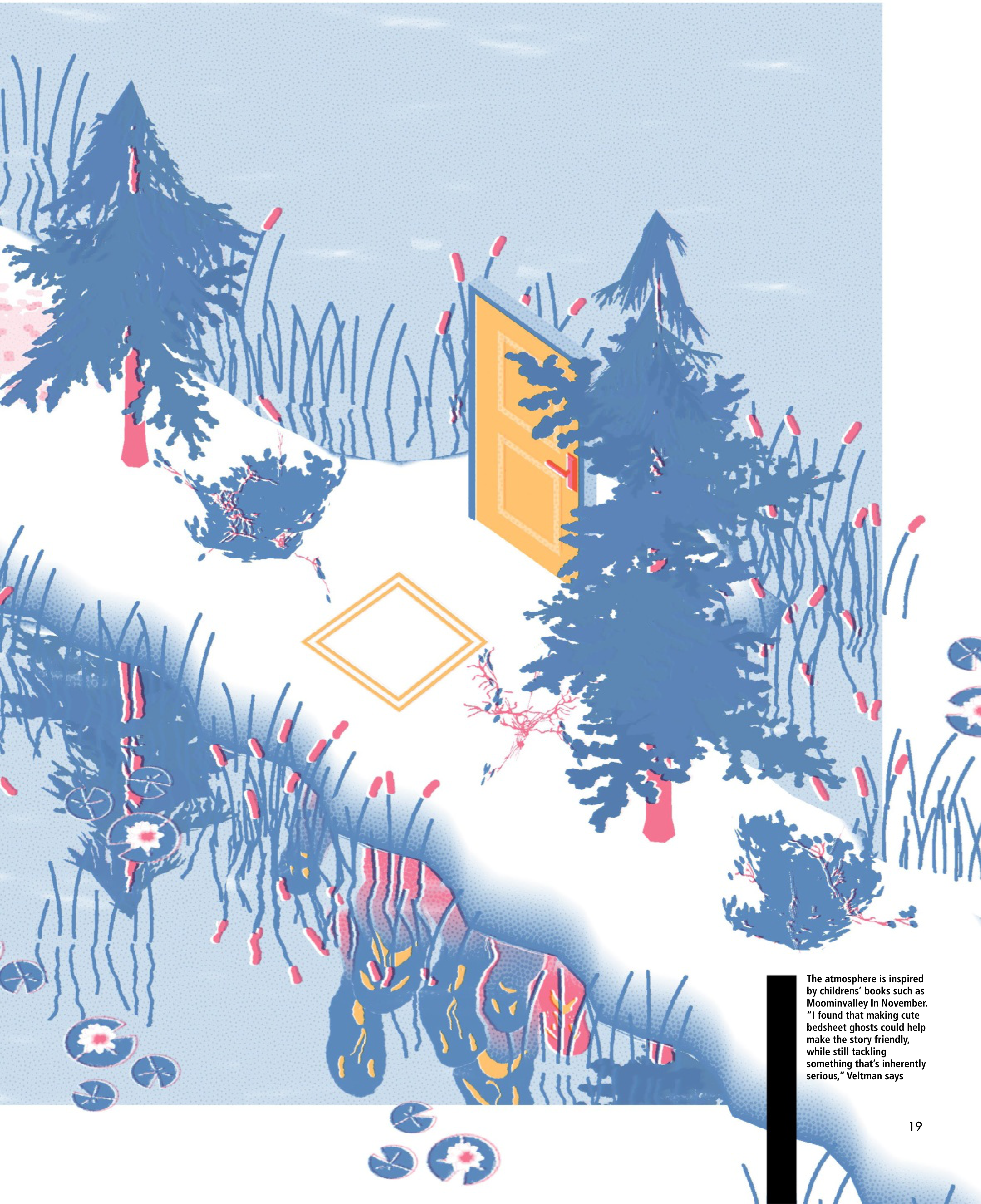
Much of *Builder's Journey* involves rearranging bricks to create paths. There are freeform elements, too: in one level you build a sandcastle

MOVING ON

The warmth of traditional techniques radiates in a sweet, sombre puzzler

What happens after we die? *The Other Side* is a narrative-driven puzzle game that takes a kid-friendly approach to death, softening its harsh edges with bold, honeyed visuals inspired by traditional techniques and artists such as Icinori and Blexbolex. "I love how screen prints and risograph prints are affected by the type of ink and paper you use," co-creator **Florian Veltman** says. "It gives such a warm, hand-crafted and lively quality." As the ghosts find out who they were to work out where they should go next, Veltman hopes parents use it to discuss complex subjects with their children when it releases next year: "My intention is to use the subject of grief and mourning as a starting point, to reflect upon the idea of remembering someone versus who they are to themselves." ■





The atmosphere is inspired by childrens' books such as Moominvalley In November. "I found that making cute bedsheet ghosts could help make the story friendly, while still tackling something that's inherently serious," Veltman says

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"I'm going to enjoy these final moments **with some of my best friends of all time** and try not to dissolve into a puddle."

Greg Rice, the tallest man in videogames, departs Double Fine after 13 years, and leaves behind the biggest puddle the Bay Area has ever known

---

"Given how some of our first party IP is incredibly special and valuable, we want to treat them with **amazing care and respect,** and have those launches be clean."

Jim Ryan explains why Sony won't be putting firstparty games on PlayStation Now on launch day. That, and all the money

XBOX ONE X
XBOX ONE X
November 7

"There is sometimes a [belief] that the more walls we put up around things, the more valuable it is. **But if we're focused on growing the game industry,** we should not be less accessible. We should be more accessible."

Phil Spencer explains why Xbox Game Pass is a fine fit for firstparty games actually, Jim. That, and all the money

---

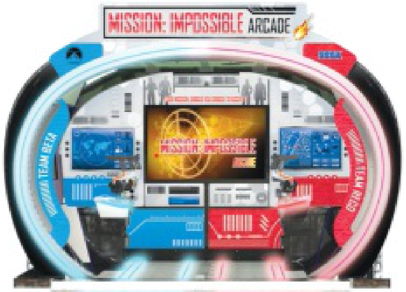
"I have sometimes wondered how I would fare with a problem where the solution really isn't in sight.
I decided that I should give it a try **before I get too old."**

getty images

John Carmack quits Oculus to pursue a new career in (checks notes) artificial general intelligence. Is VR in trouble? We worry that VR's in trouble

ARCADE WATCH

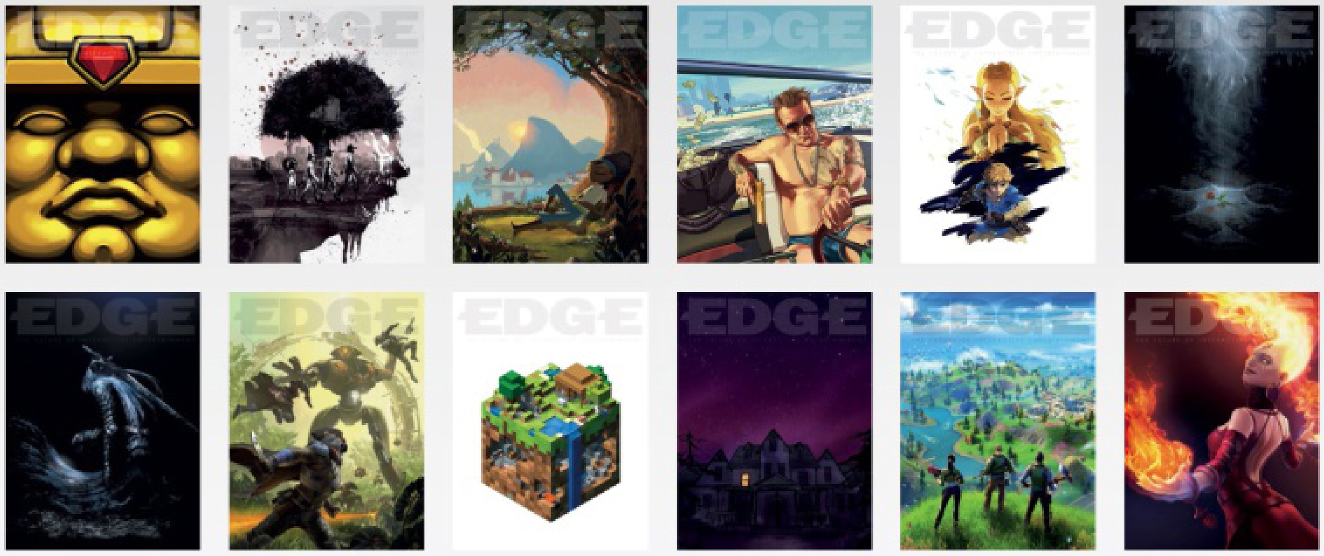
Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Mission: Impossible Arcade
Manufacturer Sega

We haven't seen a cabinet this lavish in some time. This Sega-designed licensed shooter is packed full of features to entice passers-by, from the LED light strips running around the scenery, to the spy HQ layout and "iconic fuse" animation, to the motion sensor that triggers a callout to potential punters on the central 65-inch screen. The action itself plays out on two 55-inch displays, using gun controllers powered by accelerometers; screen-mounted cameras show the current leader's face in real time to foster some (un)healthy competition. It's ostentatious in the extreme, and we have to say we're rather fond of it.

The game itself is an on-rails shooter, set across nine stages, and supports up to four players, split into two teams of two, with AI bots making up the numbers if required. Speed, rather than score, appears to be the deciding factor; in a novel twist, the gun controllers have a dual-fire mode, allowing either for a high-accuracy single shot or wider burst damage. And while it's a shooter at its core, Sega also promises some departures from the template with stealth infiltrations, hacking and chases. For once, Arcade Watch can report on a game that's already confirmed for a western release – indeed, it was announced by Sega of America, and made its debut at November's IAAPA convention in California. We'll be keeping a keen eye on **Edge**'s local bowling alley, and will be sure to get a go in before some local youth smears nachos all over it.



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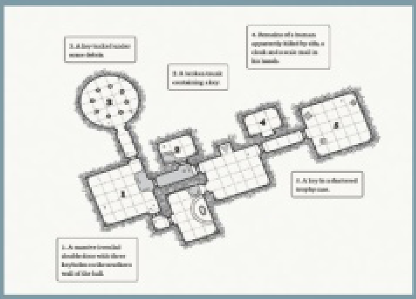
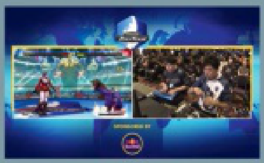
bit.ly/1pgdungeon
One Page Dungeon

Oleg Dolya creates procedurally generated toys out of code, then displays them on his Itch page for all to marvel at. His latest is *One Page Dungeon*, a tool that spits out a random dungeon floorplan every time you refresh the page. A name and short description at the top of the page sets the scene; below, a neatly gridded arrangement of chambers. The Secret Shrine Of The Cursed Dragon, for instance, holds "the remains of a halfling, a strange, sticky-to-touch ring clutched in his hands", an altar that "makes a person slightly smaller when a sacrifice is made", and a flask of holy water in another room. The Shadow Lich's Sepulcher hides three keys that must be collected to open a massive, triple-locked door. It's the perfect jumping-off point for a short Dungeons & Dragons session – or even a tiny game.





VIDEO

Justin Wong Vs Nemo
bit.ly/jwongVnemo

Irresistible force, meet unstoppable object. On one side of this *Street Fighter V* match from November's Canada Cup is Nemo, a legendary Japanese player famed for his aggressive 'rushdown' style with Urien. On the other is the famously patient, controlling Justin Wong. *SFV* has long favoured those who throw caution to the wind, and so Nemo is notionally favourite. But Wong presents a masterclass in spacing and control, and leaves one of the best players on the planet looking utterly lost at how to break through. Essential viewing, whether you study the genre or not.

WEB GAME

Behind Every Great One
bit.ly/begogame

Deconstructeam's housewife simulator is, at times, devastating. Gabriel is a successful artist; Victorine is his spouse, who takes care of all the day-to-day chores around their home. It captures the suffocating atmosphere of emotional abuse with uncomfortable accuracy: you only have so much time in the day for so many chores. You might be able to cook dinner, iron shirts and clean the bathroom, but Gabriel will complain about unwatered plants or the dishes being dirty – and then that Victorine doesn't have her own interests. There's the awkward choice at night-time of whether to acquiesce his requests for sex, too, as Victorine begins to visibly break down, and family visitors bring tensions to boiling point. There are rough edges, but it's a brilliant conceit, rendered with nuance.

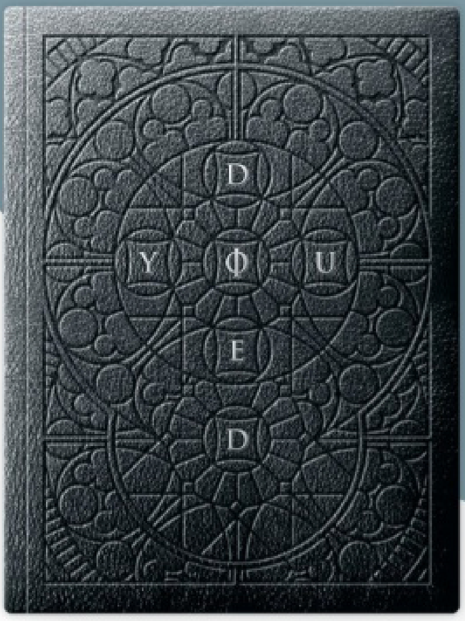
THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

BOOK

You Died
bit.ly/youdiedKS

In 2016, former **Edge** features editor Jason Killingsworth released a book on *Dark Souls*, co-authored with sometime **Edge** contributor Keza MacDonald. An illustrated paperback, it was a compendium of critique, analysis, interviews and community reportage on Hidetaka Miyazaki's masterpiece. The pair pitched a hardcover edition, but were knocked back due to the cost; now, Killingsworth is taking matters into his own hands. Now on Kickstarter, this lustrous new edition is the definitive version of the definitive *Dark Souls* book, expanded with an extra chapter and new illustrations. And if you still need convincing, the whole thing's been designed by **Edge** art editor Andrew Hind. We're not above a little nepotism, providing it gets us a freebie.



continue

Three spirit

Valve at last announces *Half Life: Alyx*, a (mainline?) series entry in VR…

Uncharted territory

Amy Hennig joins Skydance Media to create "new story-focused experiences"

Whole 'hog

The Sonic The Hedgehog movie is saved, and Twitter finally does something good

Sky's the limit

AMC is publishing weird indie games about the horror of economy-class flights

quit

Where's the fire?

…as rumours swirl that *In The Valley Of Gods* has been cancelled

Kicking & streaming

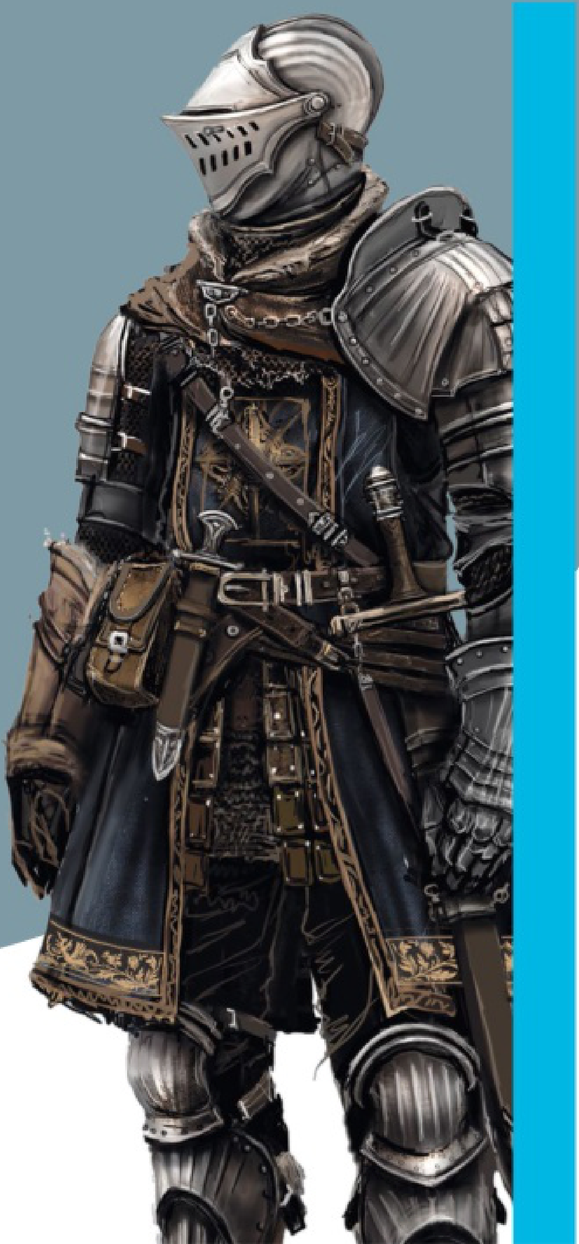
Stadia gets off to a rocky start, not least due to a bizarre Reddit AMA

Public enemy

Days Gone wins Best Storytelling at the Golden Joystick Awards. Sure

Pressure Valve

Seriously though, Gabe – a *Half-Life 3* announcement a day before we go to press?



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DISPATCHES JANUARY

EDGE
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

Issue 339

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins an SN30 Pro+ controller, compatible with PC and Switch, courtesy of 8BitDo

Post script

So Kojima Productions demanded journalists complete its new game before a review could be placed, isn't that somewhat abusive? Doesn't this help the Metacritic score by demanding such dedication? Considering how seriously gamers take 'ethics in journalism', I thought there would be a huge backlash.

Anyhow, while I understand that *Death Stranding* might not get a review, I must admit I am disappointed there likely won't be a Post Script analysis (love them!). See, I believe the game is on to something great.

Virtual worlds are giving players the chance to work on something larger than themselves. *Nier: Automata* did this amazingly with its Ending E, where players could choose to start all over to help an unknown online player beat the end boss. We know from real life that sacrificing oneself for another is a beautiful gesture. Games, however, are contained in a magic circle of safety, so there usually isn't that much to lose. I applaud how Kojima has attempted to find new ways to touch this subject.

"We know from real life that sacrificing oneself for another is a beatiful gesture"

He does so by letting players help each other indirectly with structures and vehicles, slowly turning the wretched world into something more livable. The downside is that this world first needs to be miserable to begin with. There's a thin line to tread here: make the game too much fun and nobody cares about help from others. Make the game too strenuous, and people won't care about playing it at all.

I am reminded of a recent interview with Tony Hawk, who described what it was like to finally do the 900 after years of attempts. He said he was just relieved it was over with. A lot of *Death Stranding*'s players will likely feel the same while trudging through all those boring quests. It is by design, a tiring experience. And yet, I vividly remember the moment I saw that Hawk had accomplished his feat. It was a thing of beauty, an inspiration for us all to persevere. Maybe he didn't do it for himself, but for his fans. If we could encapsulate that in a videogame, it's worth occasionally slipping and falling along the way.

Robert August de Meijer

To be clear, while it's not common to be asked to finish a game as part of an embargo agreement, developers are free to stipulate whatever they please. In *Death Stranding*'s case, however, we had no idea what we were agreeing to. Was it five hours long, or 50? Upon realising it was more like the latter, the urgency weighed heavy. Feeling pressured to rush our way through a game that's clearly at its best when given room to breathe surely coloured our opinion of it. We'll go back to it eventually, and once we've delivered all of Norman's parcels, we'll do likewise with our verdict.

The making of...

I joined the parent legion last year and now my former gaming life is unrecognisable. First to go were games that couldn't be paused, so *Destiny 2* and *GTA Online* were out. Then, pretty much everything else I wanted to play – *Doom* (2016) is quite toddler-unfriendly, it turns out.

Naturally, a Switch was bought and *Super Mario Odyssey* filled the 35-minute commute with delight. But once the credits rolled, no other game hit that sweet spot. *Breath Of The Wild* didn't suit the truncated play periods quite so well. *Oxenfree* and *The Gardens Between* were decent but short. *Into The Breach* was great, but heavy on thinking and not conducive to the brain of a tired daddy whose baby isn't sleeping well. *Untitled Goose Game* was unforgivingly boring and *Telling Lies* on iOS, although great, made me very self-conscious on the

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Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

train for reasons that, if you've played it, will be obvious.

So, a round of applause to my surprise game of the year: *Bad North*. It came to my attention in Hype and then Nintendo put it in their news feed with a big '30 per cent off' sticker. With a game style reminiscent of *Into The Breach*, it has exactly the right combination of strategy and laid-back bloodbathery for my oddly specific gaming requirements. It's the most relaxing version of mass murder I've ever engaged in (digitally or otherwise), with just enough cognitive requirements to keep me on my toes between levels. Well done Plausible Concept and Raw Fury for delivering this itinerant father's gaming highlight of 2019.
Chris Hemmens

Good for you. This feels like the start of something: ailing parents, which games have rescued you in your hour of sleep-deprived, nappy-addled, jam-smeared need?

Trigger happy

So, I looked at your games of the decade. And I don't like *Dark Souls*. I've found it increasingly hard to understand the concept of punishing difficulty and the reward of progress. I'm now 35 years old, and I really do generally play on Easy mode these days.

Now this may mean that I miss out on important systems or the mechanics of how we play. And I do feel that I miss out on a lot of interesting concepts as a player. However as I have got older, I really have put a precedence on seeing a game through as, if I'm going to invest in it, as I want to know the end result – much like a Netflix show.

I'm not sure if this makes me a bad gamer or not. I really enjoyed playing through *Catherine: Full Body* to see the new plotlines, but this was done on Easy mode. I plan on working through *Death Stranding* in the same way, just to ensure I see the ending to the game. However, I worry I am losing muscle reflex, the ability to do six things at once, and general coordination.

I'm a huge fighting-game fan and keep myself up to date with these, but given my desire to remove challenge from narrative games, I wonder how this will impact on my ability to react in those environments. The long and short is: are the **Edge** team getting worse at everything and how do you cope with this?
Martin Hollis

How dare you. Sure, our knees hurt in cold weather, we keep pulling great clumps of hair out in the shower and we twisted the same ankle twice the other day, but our reflexes aren't going anywhere. We'll be dragon-punching all-comers in the care home.

Time extend

In the past I was always very excited for next-generation consoles: new hardware seemed to introduce plenty of headroom for innovation in games. This seems to have changed. I remember CD Projekt Red claiming they were pushing the current-gen consoles pretty much to their limits with *The Witcher 3* – that was in 2015, just two years into this console generation. At the time I thought they were exaggerating, or that developers would learn to squeeze more from the hardware. Yet here we are four years later, at the end of the console generation, and *The Witcher 3* remains one of its best-looking games.

I suppose we could blame the longevity of the 360/PS3 era: that generation lasted so long that by the time of PS4 and Xbox One the graphical jump wasn't as pronounced. However, Sony estimated that the PS4 is roughly ten times more powerful than the PS3, so shouldn't that actually make the headroom available to developers this generation more pronounced?

The PC 'master race' likes to blame middling console hardware for slowing down technological progress. While there is obviously some truth to that, I don't think it's the full story. The new ray-tracing cards far exceed what's possible on consoles, but while *Control* maxed out and with full ray-tracing on is probably the most impressive technology I've ever seen, relatively speaking I was more impressed with the technical jumps made by *Half-Life* (1998), *Halo* (2001), *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3* (2004), and *Gears Of War* (2006).

It could be that I'm already the equivalent of a bitter old man pining after the good old days. But I also wonder if we've reached diminishing returns against our hardware, or perhaps the cost of making genuine graphical marvels outweighs the return. Whatever the case, I hope I'm forgiven for being much more excited about the decidedly old-school and technologically undemanding *Disco Elysium* than I am about the possibilities of next-gen hardware.
Leo Tarasov

All fair points, but assuming the next round of consoles won't have Xbox One's UI or PS4's room-shaking fans, we're very much ready.

The long game

With 339 issues lying around, I've probably become too accustomed to the way **Edge** smells to notice anything peculiar. But I still have a lot of fun flipping through back issues for these **Edge** mini-games: spotting the **E** on the inside back cover, guessing the topic for the next issue, spotting the usual letter writers (maybe I should become pen pals with Leo and Alex?), and of course, the secret monthly feature which must not be talked about. You do you, **Edge**! You make the best of your medium in so many ways.
Robert August de Meijer

Right back at you, oh saviour of Dispatches. Twice in one month! We are truly spoiled.

Knowledge

The subscriber covers are terrific, but I do find myself wondering what the regular cover looks like. Any chance you could include a thumbnail of it on the intro page alongside the 'exclusive subscriber edition' image, to satisfy the curiosity of we subbers?
Christian McGregor

You can always view the newsstand cover on our subscription pages (see p78-9 this issue, for instance) but sure, let's give it a go. Have a new 8BitDo controller by way of thanks. ■

STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

The idea of a 'culture war' sounds peculiarly modern, familiar to most of us from the battles between Republicans and Democrats in the US over issues such as abortion rights or gay marriage, and becoming a more global affair of late with the rise of the so-called 'alt-right' and so-called 'identity politics'. Yet the phrase appears in English as early as 1879, in a history of Germany and Prussia in Napoleon's time. There, it is said that a 'culture war' (from the German kulturkampf) arose in 1819, when university professors became the object of suspicion and censorship.

Indeed, though we have not always had the term for it, culture war has been a part of civilised society from the very beginning. In both its senses: first, that political debates focus on 'cultural' values (and when have they not?), and second, that cultural objects – novels, plays, and so forth – become interventions in political debates themselves.

It may then be a sign of videogames' mainstream toleration as (some kind of) artistic medium that big releases in this medium, too, can now be greeted as culture-war salvos. So it has happened with two much-anticipated autumn titles that have been interpreted as representing opposing factions on the cultural battleground.

The rebooted *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare*, for one, goes all-out with a version of modern reality in which Vladimir Putin is essentially what Hitler is to games of the Second-World-War era. It is set in a country called "Urzikstan", which sounds like a poor joke of lazy xenophobia but is evidently supposed to be a mixture of Ukraine and Syria. Your band of covert operatives is, of course, helping the nationalist faction against evil Russian militias.

Most spectacularly, this *Call Of Duty* has taken a notorious historical episode of mass killing by American forces and blamed its fictional version on the Russians. At the end of the first Gulf War, in February 1991, a long column of Iraqi forces retreating from Kuwait was first halted by American Air Force cluster bombs, and then annihilated over two days of what General Colin Powell described as "wanton killing". It later emerged that the convoy contained civilians as well as surrendering soldiers: the bloody episode became known as the Highway of Death.

Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

Two much-anticipated autumn titles have been interpreted as representing opposing factions on the cultural battleground

Twenty-eight years later, the new *Modern Warfare* tells the player in a mission briefing of "'Tariq Almawt', the highway of death" — but this highway of death, crucially, has different perpetrators. "The Russians bombed it during the invasion," a character intones, "killing the people trying to escape".

Now, you may say that this is just a fictional excuse for the player to spend some entertaining minutes trying to snipe tanks, and of course it is. But it's something else, too: if you are going to use the phrase 'highway of death', you simply can't be unaware that it refers to a specific act by American forces, easily within living memory, that many people regard as a horrific war crime. A cynical observer might even suppose this latest play in the Russia-baiting series (remember the controversy over *Modern Warfare* 2's No Russian mission, in which Russian terrorists massacre civilians in an airport?) to have been deliberate, resulting as it has in publicity-generating mainstream news stories in both Russia (where Activision will not be selling the game) and the west.

Compared to which, Hideo Kojima's latest work of baffling artistry might seem determinedly anti-political: a surreal version of the post-apocalyptic mail-delivery epic The Postman (starring Kevin Costner), with added creepy babies: it's a bleak walking simulator with a *Shenmue*-influenced attitude to finding transcendence in the boring trudge of repetitive work. And yet Kojima – an auteur by any aesthetic standards – has said that even this game is deeply political. "President Trump right now is building a wall," Kojima told the BBC. "Then you have Brexit, where the UK is trying to leave the EU, and it feels like there are lots of walls and people thinking only about themselves in the world. In *Death Stranding* we're using bridges to represent connection." Even this game dramatises a stance on political values, and is intended to do so.

Where, then, is the line between art and politics to be drawn? Well, one cynical soldier remarks in *Modern Warfare*: "You draw the line wherever you need it." As in war, so in art. But the very act drawing of such lines is inevitably an explicit battle in the culture war we all live through.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

This is usually the point they kick me out of the office. The game is done and apart from final lingering bugs and tiny polish issues, I am banned from entering any new requests or badgering any team member to change anything in the game. We need to close, ship the data to the printers and get the game onto shelves for its January 28 release date.

In a normal job, this is the perfect time to take the vacation you have put off for the last nine months, but in the world of videogames one deadline usually just makes way for the next one, which right now means thinking about post-launch content. As a one-team studio this means anything from any initial patches, to downloadable editions, to free items for early players, to a potential sequel, on the assumption this first one works out okay.

Much has been written about the increase in the costs of making games relative to the much slower increases to the cost of buying them, so I won't bother to rehash it here, except to say that most major games need to factor in some income post-launch to give themselves the best chance of breaking even and hopefully actually making some money. And then to add that the data shows the sweet spot for releasing this DLC is 30 days after the main release, otherwise (outside of a service game) most players have already begun to move on to the next big thing. So we need to make extra content, and we need to do it fast.

For *Savage Planet* we're aware it's a new IP and people are taking a risk in supporting us, so we aim to be generous. We have a few free additions planned, and engineers and artists are slowly migrating to these as they run out of bugs to fix, plus a paid DLC which will include a whole new area to explore, some new story elements and some new bad jokes. We are toying with adding a New Game+ as it will allow us to lean on the work we've already created and give people a new way to play (with a few new twists, perhaps). I've become enamoured with the idea of games that enable speedrunning, by not patching areas that may seem like an exploit, but in fact are just cunning uses of existing mechanics. And perhaps a new game mode that asks the player to win fast (which seems appropriate for a second playthrough) but also adds some tools to make it crazier.

Illustration kaeru.com.ar

Most major games need to factor in some income post-launch to give themselves the best chance of breaking even

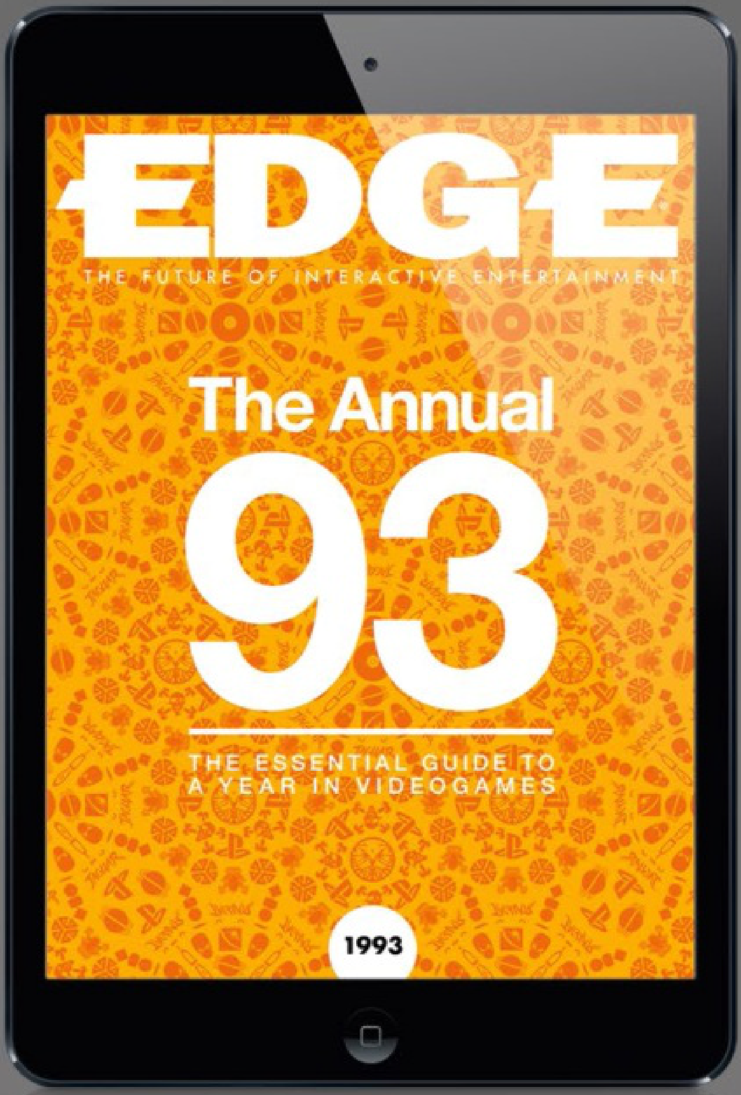
It feels a lot like shooting in the dark, though, as we are building the first one, at least, without any large-scale player feedback. We think we know what people will enjoy, but we can't be certain, so it's as much guesswork as it is a science. The first drops for any game, even a live-service game, are likely to be more of the same, or a few features that may have been close to finished but ended up on the cutting room floor due to time constraints and a need to ship.

Any feature that sits slightly outside the game, such as photo modes, are also good options for early DLC: they're fun, they don't mess with your balance or tuning, they don't complexify your game and, best of all, if they work they allow people to start posting pictures of your game to remind people who haven't tried it yet that you exist. Which, to be completely honest, is the goal of all our DLC. Just adding more content is unlikely to work, so we need the paid DLC especially to generate a story for magazines or websites that will put the game back in the public eye, so we've been looking at every feature we included in the game and seeing where we left some meat on the bone.

What can we do that would tip you over the line if you had passed on the main game? Add more funny stuff? More ridiculousness? At this point I wish we were making a game based on loot. Making things bleed bigger numbers is always motivating, and if it isn't, your game bombed and the DLC ain't moving anyway.

Instead we'll flesh out our world. If you work for the fourth-best interstellar space exploration company, who is the third-best? What would they be like? Maybe we'll do it like an '80s movie and make their leaders obsessed with martial arts and personal hygiene. Either way we need to get coverage out of it, to remind people the core game is on shelves. You'll know we did it right if you see at least one online headline saying the DLC exists: and you'll know we whiffed if it sinks without a trace.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick



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HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

32 **Diablo IV**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

36 **Snow**
PC

40 **Unto The End**
PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

44 **Paradise Killer**
PC

48 **Creaks**
PC

50 **ScourgeBringer**
PC, Xbox One

52 **Grounded**
PC, Xbox One

52 **Everwild**
TBA

52 **Tell Me Why**
PC, Xbox One

52 **Street Fighter V: Champion Edition**
PC, PS4

52 **Last Stop**
PC, Xbox One

Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Above your weight

As we stand on the cusp of a new decade and a new generation in this rapidly changing industry, it's easy to get carried away. While it's a scary time for the world at large, it's a fascinating time for games, and for the indie scene in particular, which begins the 2020s on fertile ground. Funding has never been so easy to come by, with platform holders and storekeepers willing to de-risk all manner of out-there ideas. Yet that does not mean that small teams are putting their feet up. On the contrary: they are pushing at the boundaries of what indie games mean harder than ever.

Perhaps the clearest example of that this month comes from *Snow* (p36). It's the work of a small Norwegian team with big ideas, which has found cost-effective ways of using the sort of trickery we have come to associate with some of the industry's biggest players – lavishly detailed snow-deformation tech, photogrammetry and performance capture.

Elsewhere we find plenty of other examples of small teams dreaming big. *Unto The End* (p40) is a quietly thrilling brawler from a husband-and-wife team; *Paradise Killer* (p44) is a surreal detective adventure made by two childhood friends. In this context, Amanita Design looks like a relative juggernaut, an established studio with a proven track record. But *Creaks* (p48) sees the studio push beyond our traditional expectations of its work with a foray into tautly wound horror.

For all the funding sloshing around at the moment, any creative endeavour naturally involves shouldering a certain amount of risk. But we doubt any of the indies featured this month are feeling the pressure quite like the developers of *Diablo IV* (p32). Seeking to marry the deliciously satisfying over-the-top combat of *Diablo III* with the dark, oppressive tone of *Diablo II* is no easy task, particularly when Blizzard finds itself in an uncomfortable situation and fans are harder than ever to please. On first evidence, at least, they're headed in the right direction.

MOST WANTED

Shenmue III
PC, PS4
Final code for Yu Suzuki's long-awaited epic arrived a little too late in the day for us to commit to a review this issue – we learned our lesson on that front last month. We've waited 18 years, so a few more weeks won't sting too much.

Yakuza 7: Like A Dragon
PS4
While the November rush has meant we've been too busy to check out the demo available on the Japanese store, we've already heard more than enough to know this is essential: one friend of the show describes it as a sort of *Dragon Quest X Yakuza*. That'll do nicely.

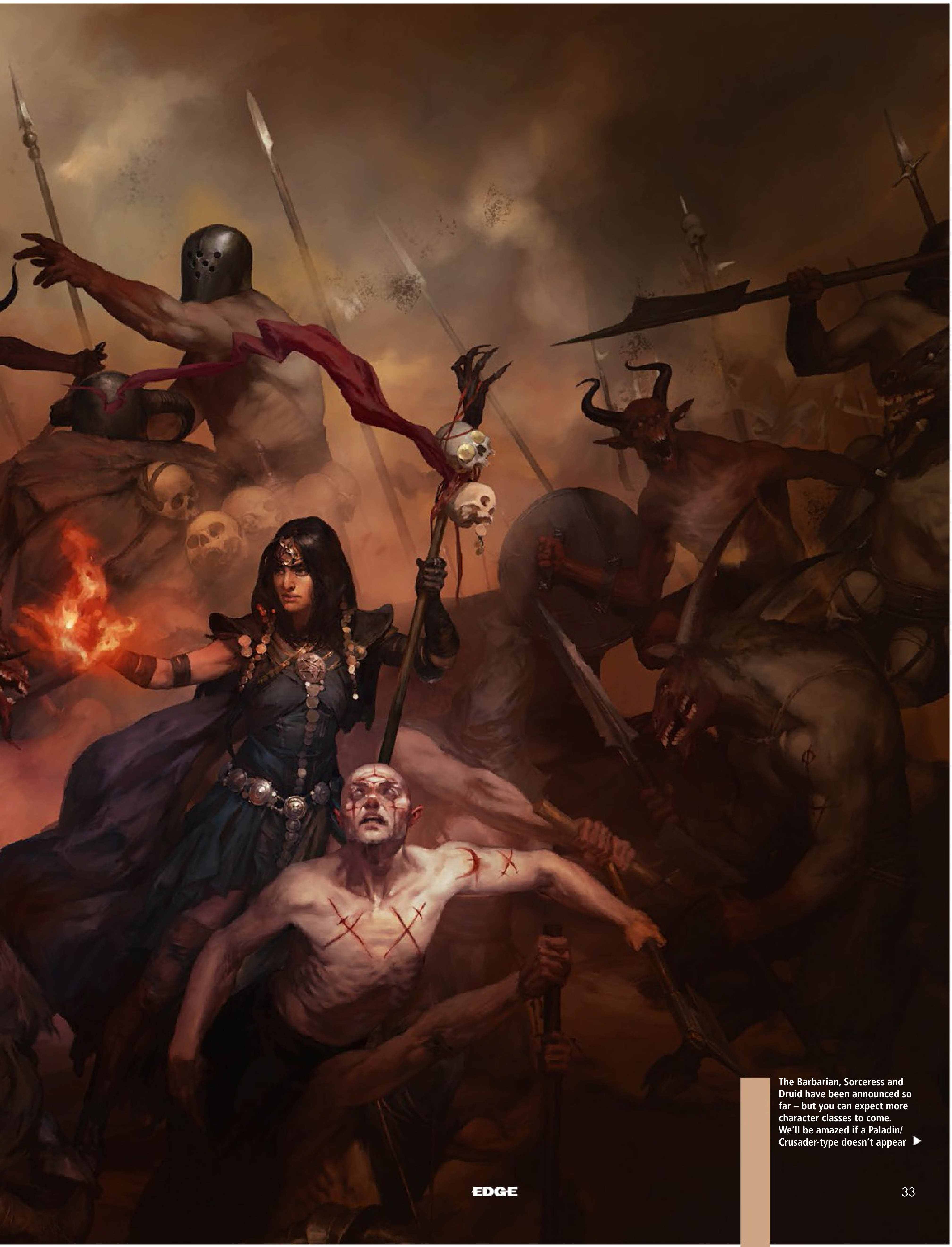
Nioh 2 PS4
Appropriately for a game about a Jedi slowly regaining his powers, *Fallen Order* (see p98) has reawakened something in us. Thankfully, our next opportunity to scratch that *Souls*-style itch is only a handful of months away.

H | Y
P | E

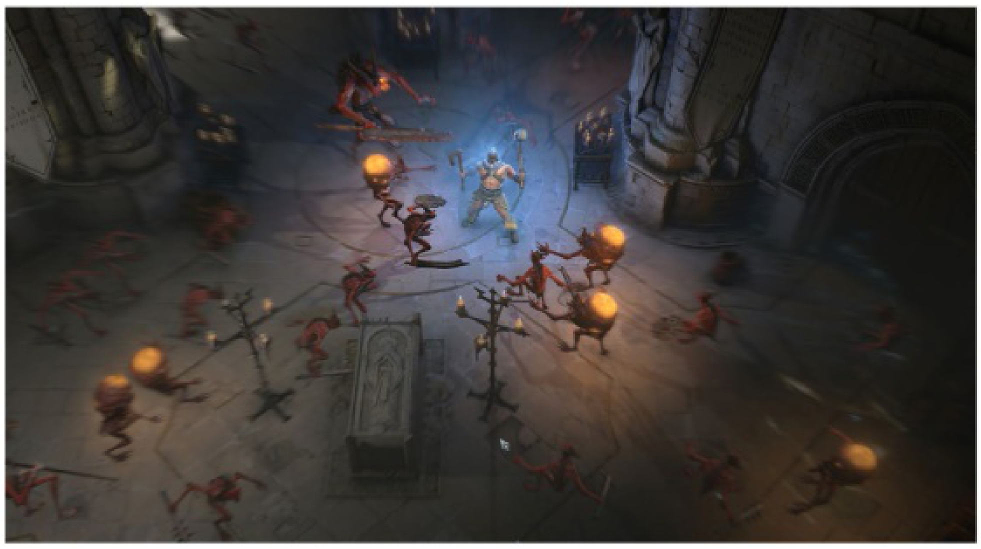
DIABLO IV

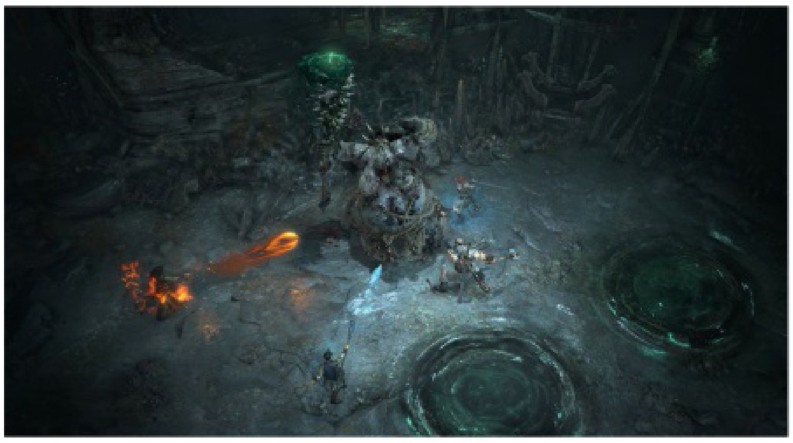
The original loot-chaser returns to its infernal roots

Developer/publisher	Blizzard Entertainment
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	TBA

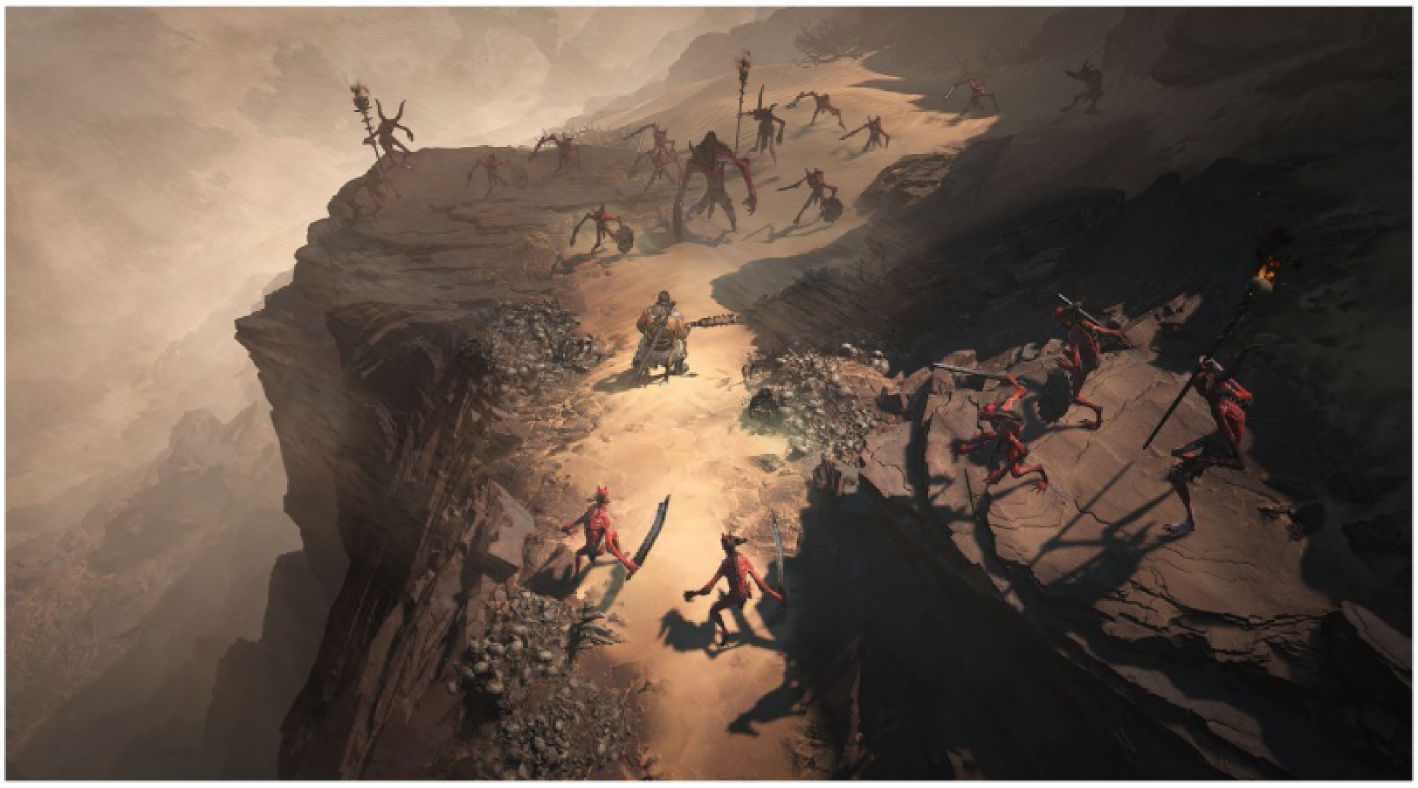


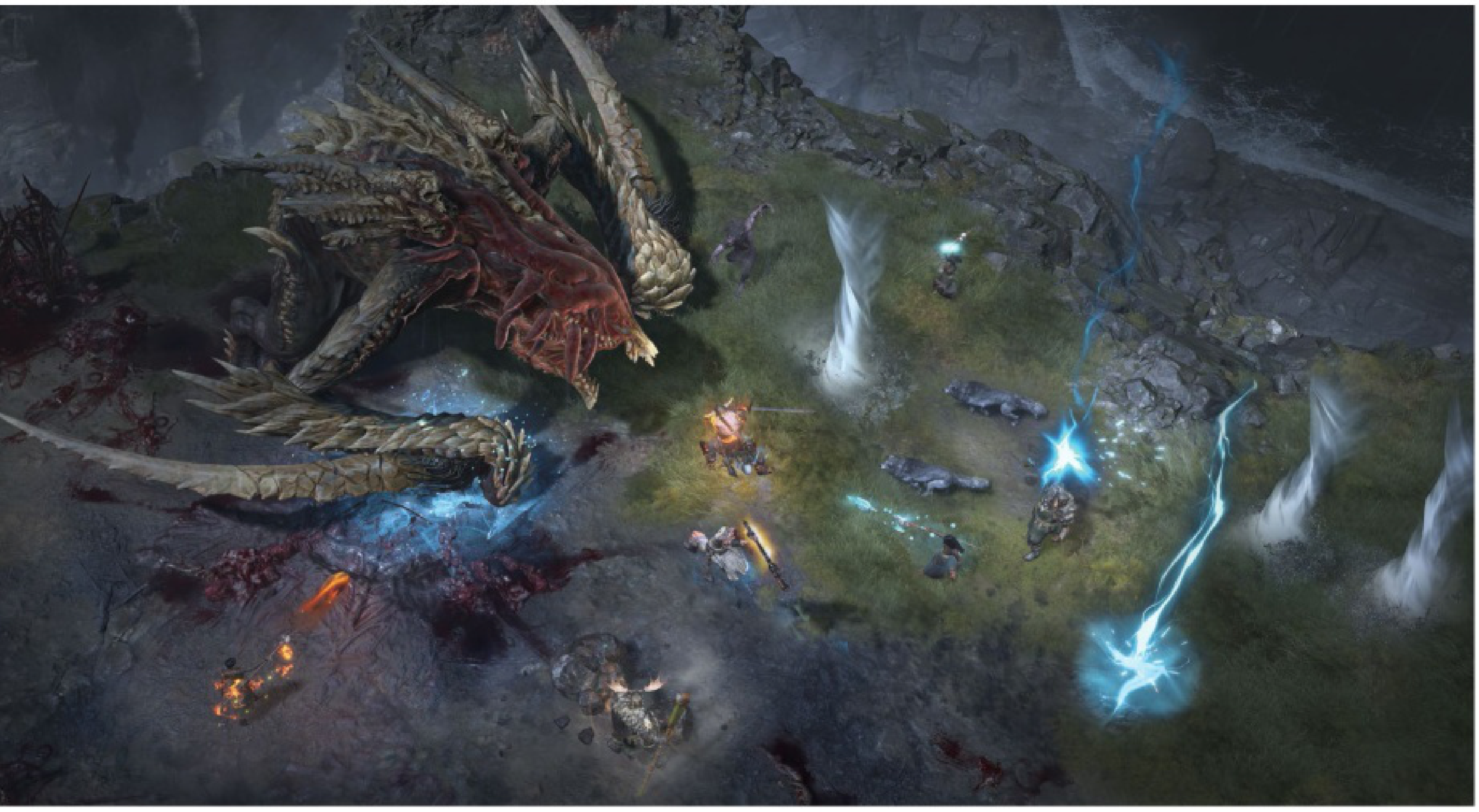
The Barbarian, Sorceress and Druid have been announced so far – but you can expect more character classes to come. We'll be amazed if a Paladin/Crusader-type doesn't appear ▶





TOP **Playing as the Barbarian is a violent, heavy experience, with plenty of bone-crunching foley.** ABOVE **The Dry Steppes is just one biome in the game – the devs are determined to make Sanctuary a living, breathing, and varied world**





TOP **The first boss we encounters, the Seahag, is a waking nightmare of turgid flesh. Nice.** ABOVE **We'll be returning to Kehjistan to battle with the Fallen once more.** LEFT **The focus is on multiplayer again, and assistance will be very welcome when facing bosses such as this one in Scosglen**

DIABLO IV

There are no clean victories in *Diablo*," *Diablo IV* executive producer and Blizzard co-founder **Allen Adham** tells us. "The world is not your typical clean world where the good guys always win and evil is always vanquished." He's not wrong: the demo we play is grungy with blood, pus and other assorted bodily fluids. Within the space of 20 minutes, we see a cursed young boy choke to death on his own vomit, the reanimated corpses of waterlogged humans pushing their faces through the mud and a Druid rip a rotting corpse in half like so much wet tissue paper. It may still have that distant, isometric camera keeping you above the action, but *Diablo IV* wants to make you feel like you're right in the middle of the fray.

"What people *did* like about *Diablo III*, we've still got in here," senior producer **Tiffany Wat** says of the carnage. "There's hacking and slashing and blood flying everywhere – we've updated our engine so we've got layered animations and death kits which means that, depending on how you kill monsters, that's how their body falls apart." Delightful – for die-hard *Diablo* fans, at least. *Diablo III* was a tad controversial among seasoned demon-slayers. Its bright, popping colours, generosity with loot and (relatively) cheerful disposition somewhat alienated those players who came to the game hoping to be horrified, bullied and beaten senseless. People stuck around for the combat, more dynamic and intuitive than ever, but were left cold by the world.

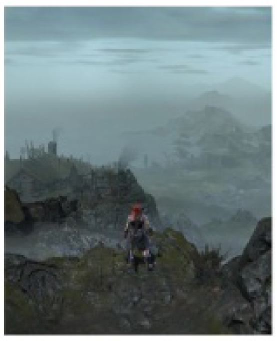
'Classic' *Diablo*, as any fan will tell you, attracts true gaming masochists. Luckily for them, Blizzard is feeling much crueller these days. "If you decapitate enemies, heads fall off. If you're a Sorceress using a flame spell, you just roast all the meat off their bones. Or you can freeze them and see them shatter into a million pieces," Wat enthuses. Even when observing from our God's-eye view above the action, we feel like we're down fighting in the trenches with our charges. The new engine Blizzard has devised from the ground up for this game layers on a day-night cycle and weather effects; new lighting tech means that if it starts to rain during battle, light bounces off the rippling puddles accumulating around you. The intense, challenging combat of *III* is now back where it belongs: in the kind of dark, brooding world that inspired so much dread in *Diablo II*.

"One of the challenges we had in making this game was staying true to *Diablo*, *Diablo II* and *Diablo III* while pushing what all of those games stood for to the next level," Adham explains. "But I think we managed it – look at what we've done with the class refreshes. We took the Druid from *Diablo II* but brought it back even better. Now he's flanked by wolves, and shapeshifts into the werebear, the werewolf. And because it's *Diablo*, we dial it all the way up to 11, too – we have shapeshifting, but we also have crazy nature spells to complement that." True to Adham's words, our time with the Druid leaves us giddy: we tear through the undead as a slavering bear, but can also cast a spell that summons wind so ferocious it pulls their skeletal bodies limb from flayed limb. We feel overpowered, as you would if you could turn into a bear at will – imagine the pub fights you'd win – but, crucially, not immortal.

> ***"Depending on how you kill monsters, that's how their body falls apart"***

The skill rune system from *III* is gone, with the systems from earlier series entries returning, letting you improve your abilities (and they'll gain new effects through levelling up) by spending points. Layer the more social MMORPG setup on top of that – while dungeons will still be private instances you share with friends, *Diablo IV* features shared-world events that pit you alongside strangers in battles against bosses – and you've got a game positioned to take on anything from *Destiny 2* to *World Of Warcraft*.

"The implications of this big, social, connected open world… that's something you're going to understand more as you play," teases Adhan. "The tech that allows us to run a massive open seamless world, and what that allows us to achieve, is an order of magnitude greater than anything we've ever done in *Diablo* before." ■



Hell is other people

For a game that prides itself on isolation and despair, *Diablo 4* has a strong focus on player interaction. Although, with its vaguely hinted-at PvP mode waiting in the wings, perhaps human interaction is going to be so brutal and unfriendly that it plays into that looming sense of dread after all. "PvP is something we've been thinking about and working on since the very first *Diablo*," explains Adham. "It's something that's been a long time coming – you'll have to go back to *Diablo II* to find it." The team wants every instance of player-versus-player combat to feel tense, worthwhile, like it belongs in this living world. "We're in the middle of prototyping some really interesting approaches to player versus player – and we're just about to lock them in."

SNOW

Why this Norwegian narrative adventure has got the white stuff

Developer	Loeding
Publisher	TBA
Format	PC
Origin	Norway
Release	TBA

The opening sequence of this narrative adventure from Norwegian micro-studio Loeding is one of the most distinctive intros we've encountered in a long time. It all happens in a child's mind: 12-year-old Oskar dreams of a world presented in a 2D ASCII aesthetic, with code built from letters and symbols. These form a top-down maze, within which we collect strings of code, allowing Oskar to establish something referred to as 'true connection'. What follows involves a startling transition that's almost like an accelerated history of videogames, taking us from the medium's most rudimentary building blocks to its cutting edge in a matter of moments.

As we complete a simple puzzle, nudging a block onto a pressure plate to keep a door open, the maze starts to change, its walls and floors shifting to form a glowing outline of a child. Within his first tentative steps, the environment seamlessly morphs into a sun-dappled forest of near-photorealistic quality. Instructed by a mysterious voice to head down a nearby well, Oskar dutifully climbs up and takes a leap of faith. The camera follows closely behind, plummeting down before twisting to face upwards, as the well's opening shrinks into nothingness. Then, from the pitch blackness, it rises again, this time emerging from the pupil of Oskar's eye as he wakes up.

The camera's journey isn't over yet either, as it moves through his bedroom window and across a few feet to capture his mother, groggily accepting a phone call from Oskar's inventor uncle, Leif. That director **Jonathan Nielssen** is a graduate of the UK's National Film And TV School is therefore no surprise – though the idea for *Snow* only came after he left. Having been travelling abroad since he was 18 (he's now 27), Nielssen returned to his home town only to be struck by how much it had changed in the intervening years. He took hundreds of photos and videos at night to capture its peaceful ambience, and used it as inspiration for what would become the fictional Norwegian town of Barvik. The game is set in 2050, but Barvik is in stasis, a community that has become, as Nielssen puts it, "a time capsule" of the 1990s. With its residents rejecting any and all technological advances since then, it's a place that finds itself 60 years behind the times.

Snow, however, is anything but old-fashioned – particularly in the way it's being made. Having spent a couple of months tinkering with snow-deformation tech, Nielssen contacted **Nikolay Savov**, a producer with whom he'd worked on student game *Falling Skies*, which made waves at a few events in late 2017 before being scrapped (the pair are coy about the precise reasons). Savov contacted FBFX, a London-based company that provides special effects costumes to the film and TV industries, and using FBFX's ▶

Nikolay Savov believes a convergence of games and films is getting closer: "It's interesting to experiment with [performance capture and photogrammetry] and see how far the medium can go"

130-camera capture setup, scanned four actors to pore-level detail, before recording half an hour of footage with performance-capture studio Centroid3D at Pinewood Studios.

It's an expensive process, especially for an independent studio, but Nielssen had given himself a head start, having bought a DSLR camera to photograph his home town. "With the snow outside, you get quite good lighting to do photogrammetry," he laughs. "I did tests with that and then that's how I created a workable pipeline. I basically took a scan using my own face and found an easy, cheap and efficient way to get that into the engine. This helped us start a dialogue with FBFX – they knew after we had scanned the actors we could just take it mostly straight into the game."

Although we only get to see a snippet, the fine performance of Christy Meyer as Oskar's mother Elsa in particular suggests it was worth the outlay. But surely a full game would be prohibitively costly for such a small team? Nielssen doesn't believe that photorealism is necessary to help us empathise with human characters – he rightly notes that Pixar can tug effortlessly at our heartstrings – but he does think it's important for games to try to push the technical envelope where possible, even for smaller teams. "It brings it closer to the quality of... let's say a film, which in turn might make a broader spectrum of people interested both on the consumer side and also in terms of artists taking games seriously." Financiers, too, it seems; after doing the rounds at trade events recently, *Snow* attracted an investment grant from the Norwegian Film Institute, enough for Savov to start thinking about renting a small office space rather than working from his parents' living room, or the kitchen of environment artist Gustav Morstad, the third of the studio's full-timers.

> ***"Making a good story is a long, long process. It feels a bit like archaeology"***

In the meantime, the short demo build gives us an idea of what we can expect to find later in the game. That ASCII-inspired 'dream world' will feature again elsewhere, albeit via much faster transitions, as Oskar gradually gains new powers to hack objects in the town. In one set-piece, he'll be charged with helping his (apparently well-heeled) friend Eva abscond from her parents' mansion, opening security gates and switching off cameras so he can sneak in and break her out.

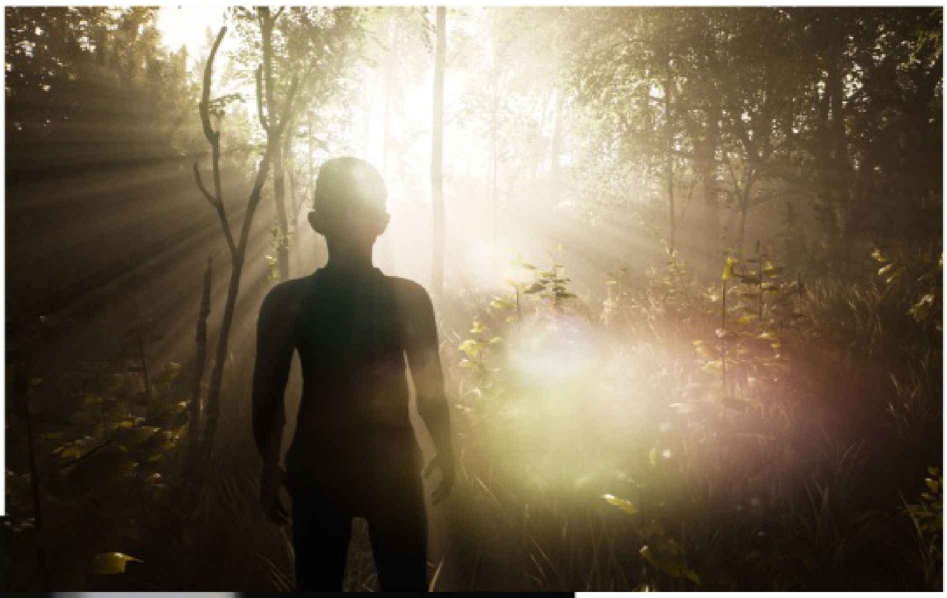
The juxtaposition of the two worlds is striking, and Nielssen believes that contrast is key to the game's appeal: on the one hand, you have a very contemplative, contemporary narrative adventure that's all about exploration and atmosphere, and then a blast of retro-feeling action. "It's almost as different as you can get," he says. "The idea is that this is a very gamey, arcade-style space, with 8bit music. Some of the more complicated machines will have antivirus, which turns it into a bit of a boss fight, and that's what you need to get through to complete the hack."

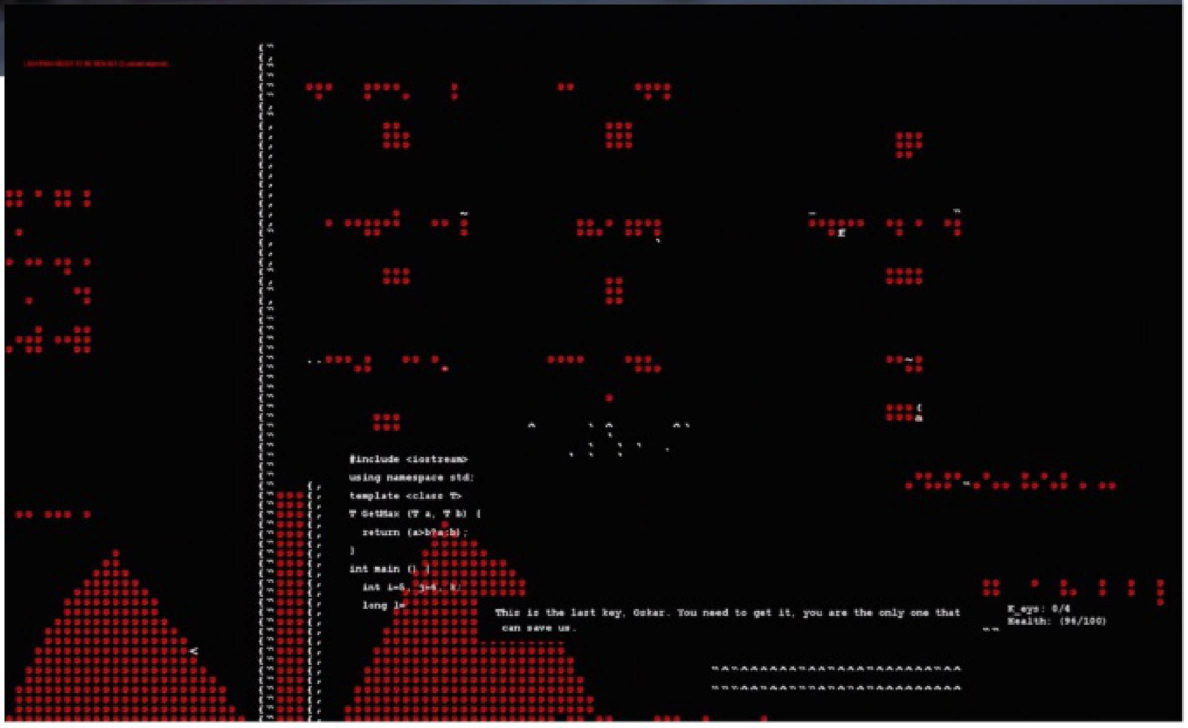
There's a story explanation for why the hackspace is so game-like, though Nielssen suggests it would be a spoiler to say why. Then again, we wonder if we already know a little too much. An ominous tower looms over the town; this, Nielssen says, belongs to a government special-forces agency, which has shown up looking for some AI software over which it's lost control. It doesn't take a giant leap to imagine how this might be connected to Oskar's dreams. Then again, as Loeding has already demonstrated, there's more to *Snow* than meets the eye, and it's fair to expect the same from the script, developed by Nielssen in collaboration with writer Nathan Hardisty. "Making a good story is a long, long process," Nielssen says. "It feels a bit like archaeology. You dig carefully around it and sometimes you don't really know what you have until you've developed the whole thing."

You could say the same for making games, of course. The next step for Loeding, Nielssen says, is GDC, and developing the demo further into a more substantial vertical slice. The one thing he's keen to avoid is over-scoping, and letting development drag on needlessly. "I'm not out to make this a ten-year process," he says. "We want to be able to ship it and learn from our mistakes for the next project." Unlike the blanket of white covering the town, then, *Snow* may not be pristine. But it's hard not to admire this pioneering team as it takes its first steps into untouched territory. ■

Take notice

When Oskar isn't busy hacking, he can help out Barvik's other residents via sidequests posted on a large noticeboard. Townsfolk will post requests here – one is looking for help finding their lost cat – alongside strips of paper with their phone number. You'll need to tear these off and head for the local phone box to accept their requests. It's a relatively cost-effective way to include more NPCs beyond the central cast without the need for expensive motion capture, Nielssen says. "We want to be able to get the game out, so we have to look at other ways of getting characters in there. Then hopefully in the next game we could aim for more characters that would be captured in the same way as the four core characters we have now."



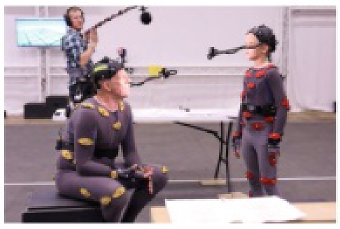


```
#include <iostream>
using namespace std;
template <class T>
T GetMax (T a, T b) {
  return (a>b?a:b);
}
int main () {
  int i=5, j=6, k;
  long l=
```

This is the last key, Oskar. You need to get it, you are the only one that can save us.

K_eys: 0/4
Health: (96/100)

TOP **This may only be a small slice of the finished game, but its world feels authentic; those night-time photography excursions were evidently worth it.** RIGHT **The code-world segments are a little more involved than your average hacking minigame**



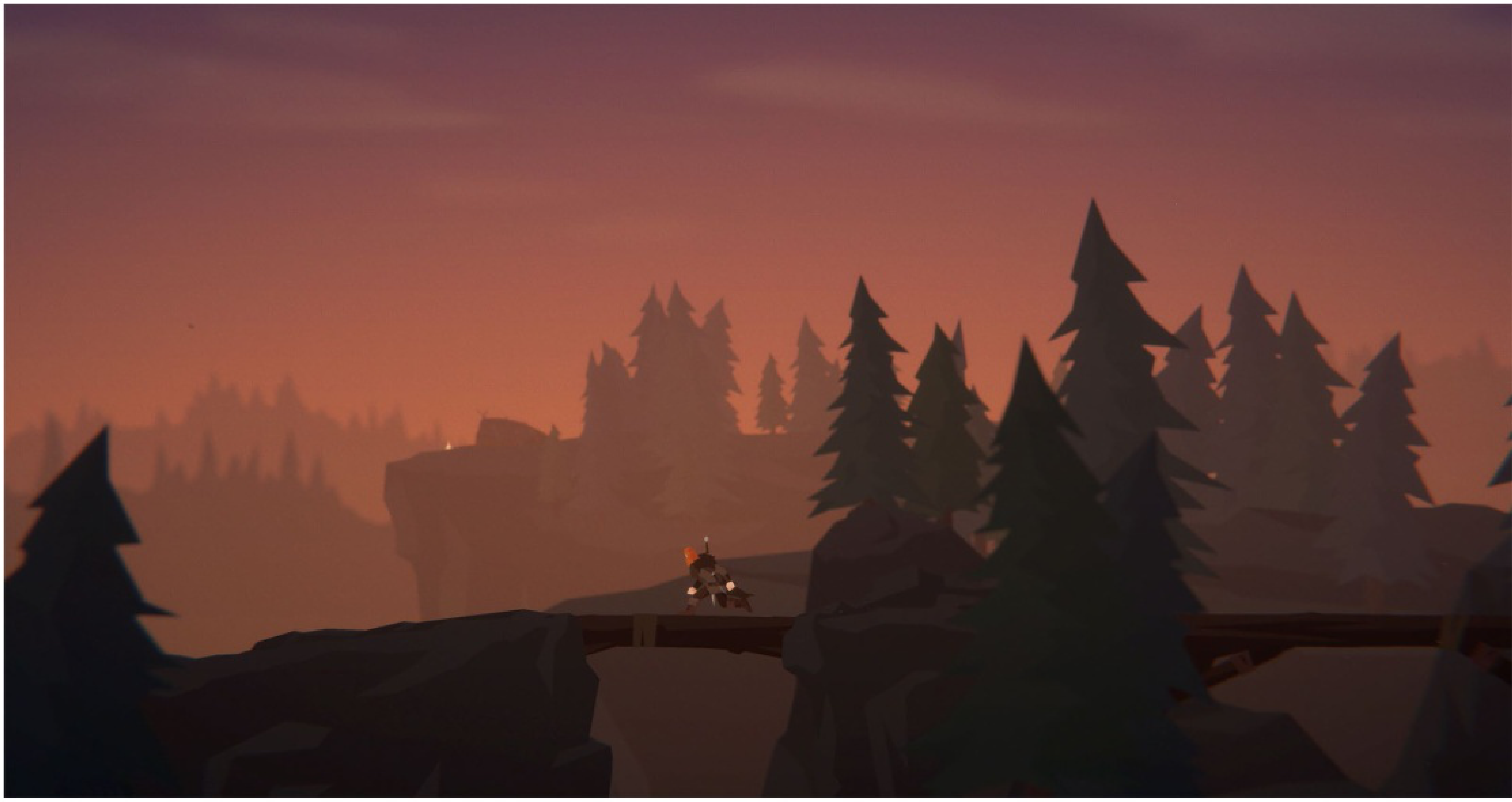
TOP **Nielssen suggests that smaller developers having free access to Unreal Engine has had a huge impact on the indie sector. "It's great for creativity," he says.** ABOVE **Ideally, Loeding's plan is to have four more characters scanned and captured to the same detail as the current four. Finances permitting, of course.** MAIN **Oskar's uncle recommends seeking help from outside Barvik should the boy's dreams persist, though his mother is extremely reluctant to leave the bubble of their town**

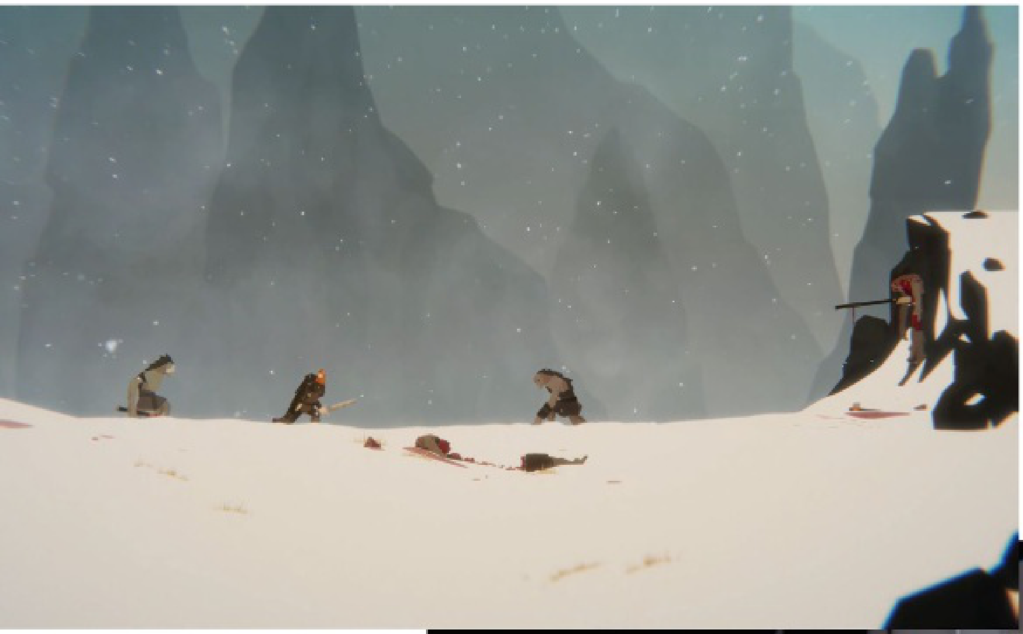
UNTO THE END

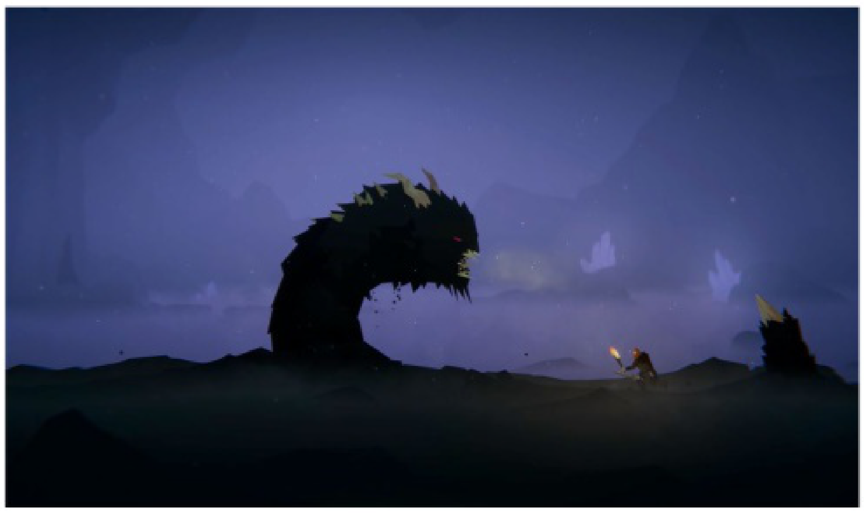
Learn to be a warrior alongside another of gaming's unlikely dad-heroes

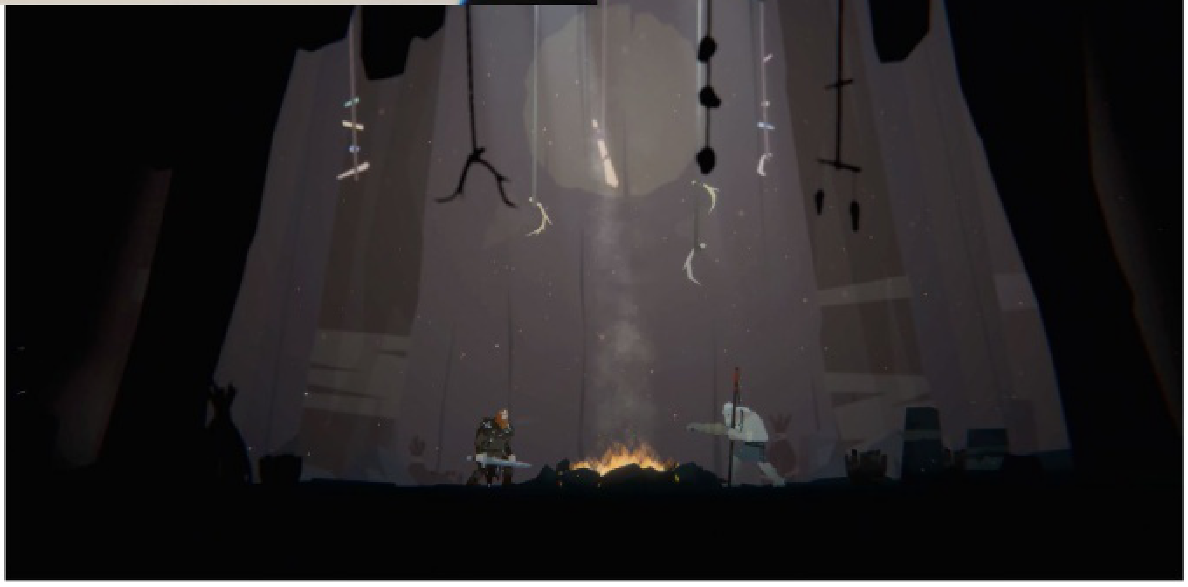
Developer	2 Ton Studios
Publisher	Big Sugar
Format	PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	TBA

The more comfortable you become in combat, the gorier you can make fights: with enough skill, you can decapitate your enemies in one hefty sword-swing ▶









TOP **There are moments of stark beauty in *Unto The End*, which has a similar style to *Another World*.** ABOVE **The woad are the least of your worries as the game wears on.** LEFT **Take too many hits, and you'll drop to one knee to indicated bleeding status. You'll need to heal quickly to survive your injuries.** BOTTOM **Sometimes it's not entirely clear who's friend and who's foe – and this can even change depending on how you act**

UNTO THE END

Realism can be anathema to good game design: if you're not going to allow the player to jump, for instance, you'd better have some sound reasoning for the decision, because jumping is both fun and useful. We worry, then, when **Stephen** and **Sara Danton** tell us that realism is one of the core tenets of their 2D action game *Unto The End*. The first thing we do is hit X, and our bearded avatar jumps. A good start.

The movement is not exactly what you'd call athletic, but this suits our hero. He's a visibly downtrodden, heavy-set sort of fellow – his breathing is often laboured – who's searching for his missing wife and child. He's not exactly bouncing on the balls of his feet. We feel the full heft of him as he throws his weight across a gap at our commands, or dodge-rolls away from a collapsing cliff, and it seems appropriate. But the real convincer comes when we run up against an obstacle we can't seem to jump high enough to clear. "Oh, there's a double jump," Stephen Danton explains, and we raise an eyebrow, thinking of "realism", as we're told to push forward against the rock face while jumping. We do so – and to our surprise, the man uses his momentum and an outstretched hand to give himself an extra boost.

Small, clever details like this are everywhere in our demo of *Unto The End*, and help keep the commitment to realism atmospheric, rather than annoying. There's very little UI to speak of: instead of a health bar, a stooping stance and blood on our clothes tells us how much damage we've taken. The animations layered onto the graphic, *Another World*-esque art style are meticulously choreographed, and are key to telling the story wordlessly – both narratively, and mechanically.

At first, we're not ready to listen, too busy getting to grips with the combat system. With our sword held either high or low, we can deal blows; we can deflect them in the same way, the clang and reverberation of metal so precisely rendered that we can almost feel it in our palms as our character reels back for just a moment. Three deflections breaks an enemy's posture, and we can unleash a more damaging attack. Each successful defence resets your stance, however – you can't just continue to hold up after blocking a high hit if you see another incoming, and must push your sword back into place once more. We understand the thinking, but can't help but feel it's persnickety, and using thumbsticks makes it feel slightly too loose. The Dantons happily agree that adding in an option to play with the D-pad might help.

It's a simplified take on games such as *For Honor*, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* or (the criminally underappreciated) *Absolver*, perhaps, with a few extra wrinkles thrown in: a shoulder charge on the right trigger, a throwable dagger – which needs to be manually retrieved – on a bumper. We tend to forget those, however. At first, we die constantly to the orc-like 'woad', just a couple of wrong guesses spelling disaster. To survive, we find ourselves focusing intently on their physical tells. Each enemy is hand-designed, meaning that we're starting from scratch every time we meet a new woad: this one's attacks can be ducked under, another throws spears that have to be dodge-rolled past (and we can throw them back at our foe).

Most of Unto The End seems to be about keeping us honest, which we can only respect

Slowly, it all comes together, our understanding of each opponent's rhythms meaning our mastery improves with every fight. Well, mostly: we feel cheated at times by bits of level dressing, such as large trees on the plane closest to us that block some enemy attacks from view, or having to fight in the dark in caves when our torch is knocked from our hands. Then again, it does force us to be more careful about our positioning. Indeed, most of *Unto The End* seems to be about keeping us honest as a player, which we can only respect. And while, realistically, there isn't too much here we haven't seen before, the grace and thought with which this is put together already has us eager to, erm, jump in. ■

Hit the woad

After our demo's boss fight, we sheathe our sword, and press on – only to run into a woad clutching the dead body of one of his own. It doesn't seem like the moment to attack. Indeed, we approach cautiously, and are gifted a necklace. Stephen Danton assures that, had we entered the scenario with our weapon drawn – or even if we turned back and pulled it out – it would play out quite differently: there'd be a fight, and we'd instead take with us the bloodied version of the item. Depending on the items you accrue, the hero will either have dream-like playable flashbacks, or more difficult-to-navigate nightmarish visions.

PARADISE KILLER

The murder mystery that lets you decide whodunnit

Developer/publisher	Kaizen Game Works
Format	PC
Origin	UK
Release	2020

Most mystery stories, for all the questions they throw at the reader, viewer or player, are founded on certainty. The detective character is a knife, cutting through a tangle of disinformation to reveal the truth. Once they do, it is absolute – mystery solved, no further questions, your honour. But this is very much not the case in *Paradise Killer*, a murder-mystery game where everything is uncertain. The dizzyingly strange world of alien gods and demons your detective moves through. The kind of game you're playing, as it flits between 2D visual novel and Unreal Engine-powered firstperson exploration game. And most of all, the nature of its whodunnit – because *Paradise Killer* promises that there is no single correct answer to that question.

You play Lady Love Dies, an immortal investigator who's been brought out of exile to solve the biggest crime ever seen on Paradise Island: the murder of its entire ruling council. Which brings us to the difficult question of what exactly Paradise Island is. Creative director **Oli Clarke Smith**'s answer begins in pre-history, when "alien gods came to earth, enslaved man, and fought wars across the Earth". So, yes, this is a fantasy world with a long history, both within the fiction and without – the setting actually predates the entirety of *Paradise Killer* as it currently exists.

Last April, when Clarke Smith and childhood friend **Philip Crabtree** quit their jobs (at mobile-focused studio Pixel Toys and *Until Dawn* dev Supermassive Games, respectively) to form Kaizen Game Works, they didn't have a solid plan for their first project. "We started out making a top-down shooter," Crabtree, now technical director on *Paradise Killer*, says. "But we struggled to find what would make it distinctive." They canned the project, but kept the setting: an island that exists outside of reality, ruled over by the Syndicate, humans granted immortality by the gods, which is constantly striving for perfection and constantly failing, being destroyed and rebuilt.

The version of Paradise Island you're exploring is actually the 24th iteration, on the eve of its destruction to make way for the next attempt, nicknamed 'Perfect Twenty-Five'. Whether this is a metaphor for the game's own development, Kaizen doesn't say, but it certainly fits. After the shooter was put aside, the pair started working on a "walking simulator, quote unquote, which was a lot less mechanically dense," according to Clarke Smith. Eventually, though, they landed on their big idea: "what if we make

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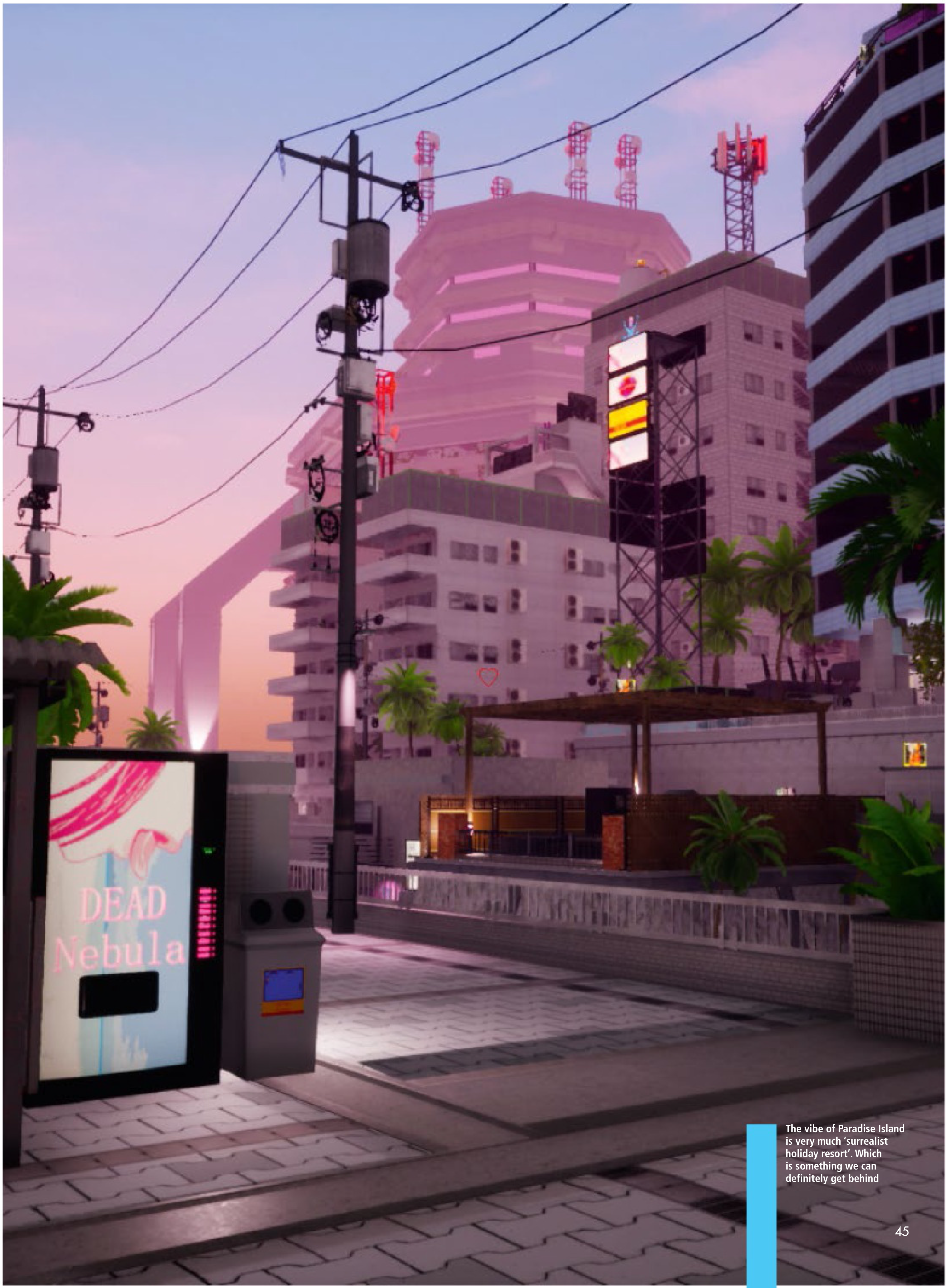
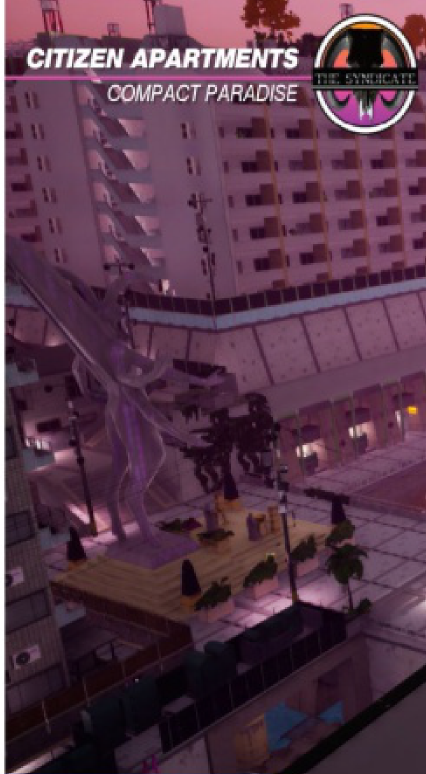
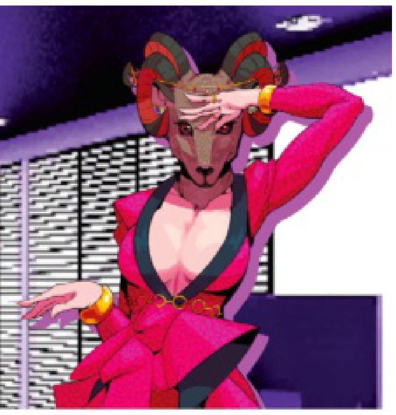


The vibe of Paradise Island is very much 'surrealist holiday resort'. Which is something we can definitely get behind



PARADISE KILLER

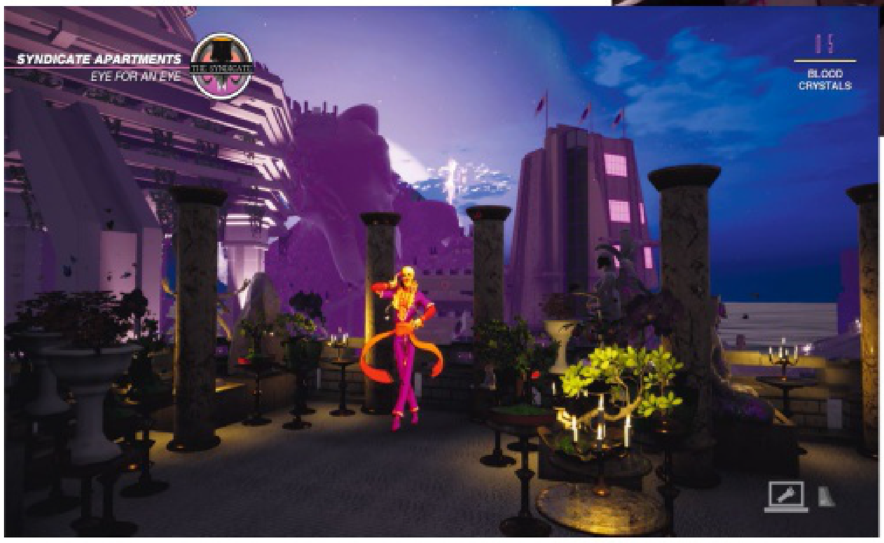


a murder mystery game that's completely open-ended, completely non-linear, where there's no right answer – it's just up to you to prove your version of the truth?" From there, *Paradise Killer* mutated into a much more systems-driven game, the version we're now playing in pre-alpha.

We explore the island in firstperson, looking for clues and interrogating suspects in whatever order we fancy. When we do encounter a suspect, or any other character, they take the form of static sprites dropped into the 3D world. It works, just about, because every single aspect of *Paradise Killer* is aggressively stylised. The world is rendered without normal maps, exposing the raw geometry beneath, while the UI is inspired by vaporwave, with 16bit-bright colours and layouts that look like they were cooked up using PowerPoint 97. The backdrop to your conversations is provided by heavily treated stock photos which look like they've been filtered through MS Paint.

The effect lands somewhere between a Grimes record and the Dreamcast games the two developers grew up playing. Explaining how these disparate parts fit together, Clarke Smith points to the pair's days in a punk band, reading zines and handwriting liner notes for the CDs they'd try to sell at shows. "That kind of clunky DIY aesthetic helps tie the disparate elements together."

Crabtree says they're not afraid of leaving some sharp edges in their game. "Things can be surprising, things don't have to blend smoothly and gently into each other," he says. "Not just sharp in the sense of the angles and the polys we've used, but in the way something sits in the world." As you play *Paradise Killer*, you encounter odd moments and ideas which jut out, as if two different games are pushing against one another like tectonic plates under the surface. A puzzle seemingly lifted from an early *Resident Evil*; a handful of Romanian vocabulary tossed into dialogue; a fetch-quest ghost you summon through meditation; the simple fact that this is a detective game where you can unlock a double jump. "We wanted to make it this blend of things we like," Crabtree says.

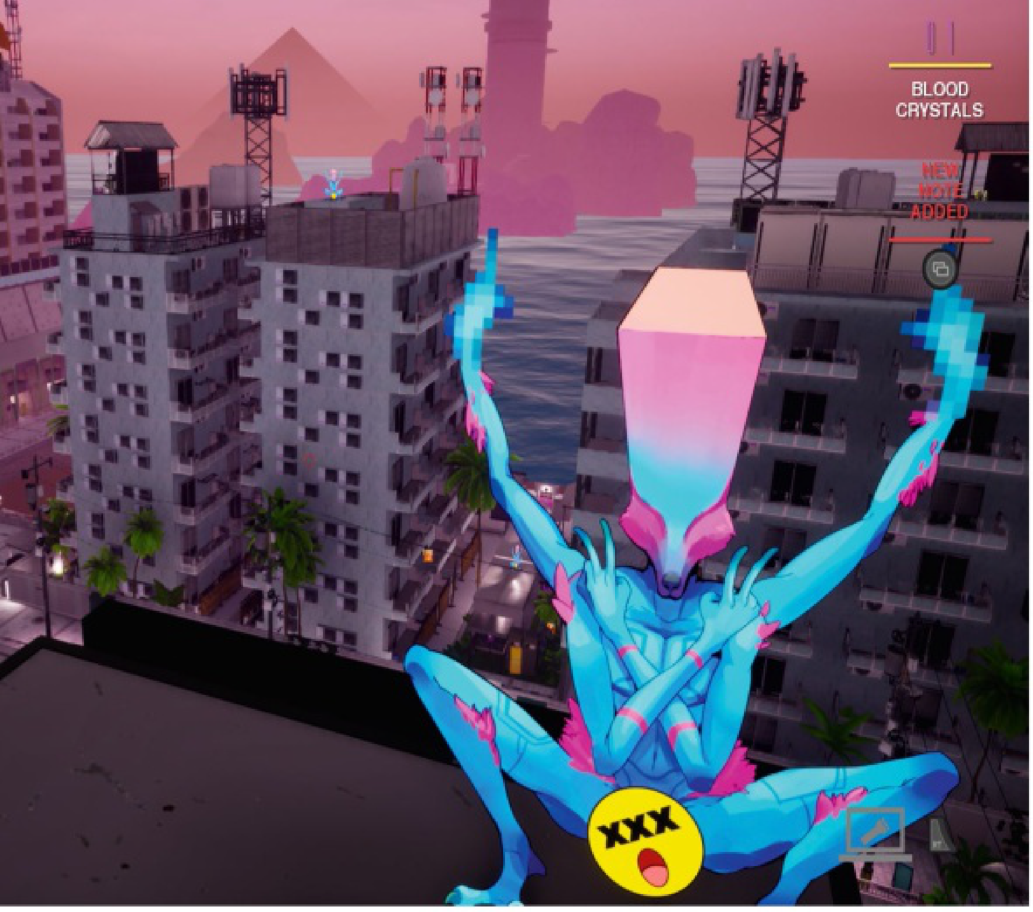


ABOVE **Character sprites are superimposed onto the 3D world. It certainly makes for a striking visual**

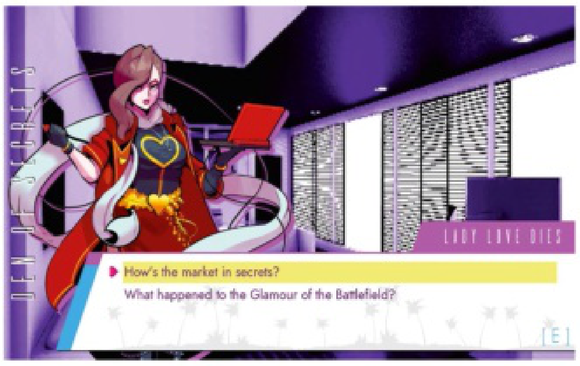
All of which sounds incredibly ambitious for a two-man team, in the same way strapping wax wings to your back and heading for the sun is ambitious, but they seem pragmatic. At least, relatively speaking. The decision to use 2D character models, for example, was informed by practical considerations as much as art direction – Kaizen is a two-man team (with the aid of artists Curran Gregory and Rachel Noy) without any experience in animation. "When you set out to make a videogame, you can do anything – but not everything," Clarke Smith says. "And characters were not a battle that we wanted to fight." This is smart, because the central idea of *Paradise Killer* itself is so bold, so close to that burning-hot sun, that you suspect Kaizen needs to focus all of its energy on pulling that off.

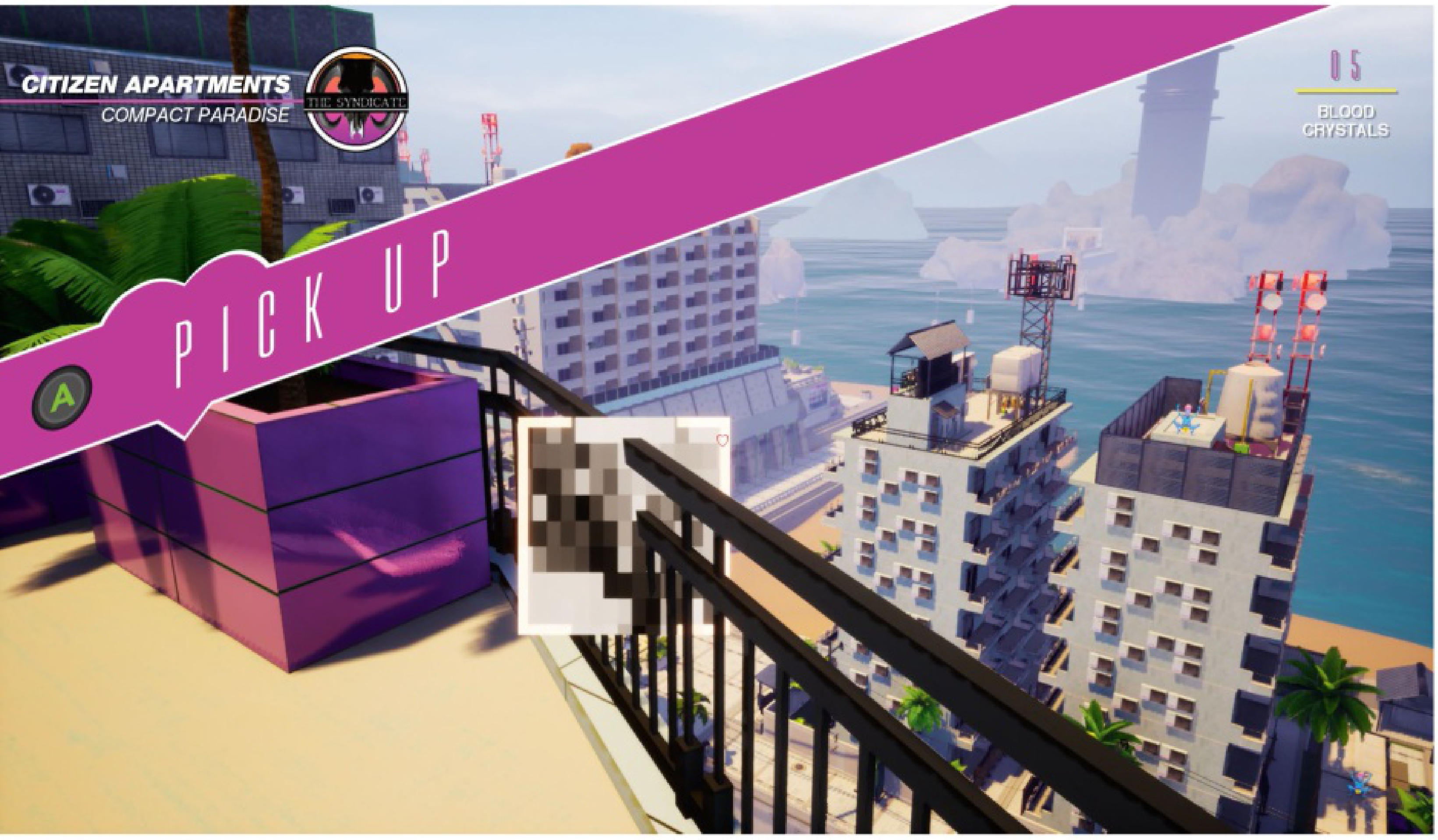
> ***"When you set out to make a videogame you can do anything – but not everything"***

You're free to decide what to investigate, collecting evidence like items in your



LEFT **This is Shinji, the demonic edgelord, spouting conspiracies and casual misogyny. Shinji is the worst.**
BELOW **Lady Love Dies has pre-existing relationships with many suspects**


DEN OF SECRETS
LADY LOVE DIES
How's the market in secrets?
What happened to the Glamour of the Battlefield?
[E]

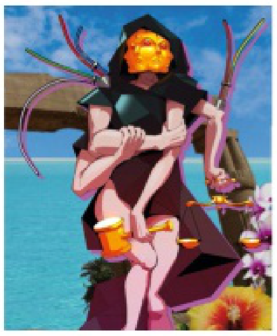


ABOVE **You'll find trinkets and Blood Crystals, the game's currency, hidden in corners of Paradise Island**

inventory as you go, but more importantly, at any point from half an hour into the game, you can choose to return to the judge who handed you this case and trigger the climactic trial. "That's the point of no return," Clarke Smith says. You present your evidence, make your case, and the Judge rules whether you're right or wrong. Case closed.

Vitally, though, that ruling has nothing to do with which suspect you've picked. "The judge never says, 'You've got that wrong,'" Clarke Smith says. "The judge says, 'You haven't got enough evidence'. And it's not a systemic thing where we say, 'Well, you've got three out of five, that's good enough for a conviction', because no two pieces of evidence are equal in importance."

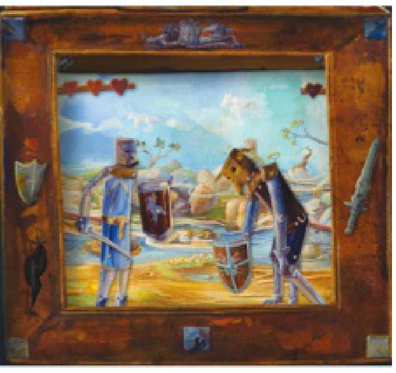
Kaizen describes the trial as a discursive process, with an epilogue section to show the consequences of your decisions, but we didn't get to experience this aspect of the game for ourselves, and the team are understandably tight-lipped about the specifics of their ending. Which, perhaps appropriately, makes it very hard to make a solid judgement on *Paradise Killer*. More than most games, its success will hinge on this big finale, because any murder-mystery story is only as good as its parlour-scene reveal. Even if you're the one making up the answers. ■



Blind justice

There is a canonically correct answer to the game's mystery, but Kaizen doesn't intend to reveal it. Ultimately, it doesn't matter – even if that was the answer you uncovered, you might choose to ignore it. The system doesn't just let you find your own truth; it lets you decide how much of it to present. So if, say, you wanted the guilty party to go free, you could intentionally pin the crime on an innocent. "We're not trying to say there's a message of power corruption in the game," Crabtree says. "But we do know there are cases in the real world where police or the justice system [get it wrong] because of the power struggle – and we want you to be able to explore that."

Developer/publisher Amanita Design
Format PC
Origin Czech Republic
Release TBA



CREAKS

Amanita's eerie puzzler is anything but bird-brained

After Playdate, *Creaks'* portable light switch is the second-best crank we've had our hands on this year. Its genius is that it takes a split-second to activate, and that not-quite-instant response makes for a few nerve-wracking close calls. In one room of *Creaks'* labyrinthine mansion – as cluttered as it is convoluted – you're forced to attract the attention of a mechanical dog, before racing over to a spot just beyond the reach of a lamp's light. With the bulb dimmed, we wait for the right moment to wind the crank so it comes back on just as our yapping pursuer runs beneath. It transforms instantly into a harmless chest of drawers, letting out a noisy rattle as its momentum brings it to rest by our feet. That's one way *Creaks'* gently shivery brand of horror distinguishes itself from its peers: here, things go bump in the *light*.

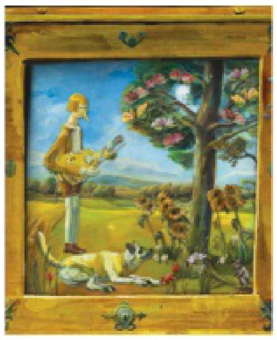
The devil in Amanita's games is in the detail, and with this new build giving us roughly half the game to play, we see it's much more than just a series of pretty but otherwise fairly familiar puzzles involving levers, pressure plates and the manipulation of light to trap and steer enemies. That isn't to be critical of the puzzles, which organically develop from straightforward ideas into multifaceted challenges that can spread beyond a single room, even with the camera already zooming out to accommodate pipe organs, libraries and giant clocks. That may occasionally mean going eyeball-to-unblinking-eyeball with an ominous floating jellyfish, our protagonist technically safe (while looking anything but) within a strip of light barely wider than he is.

These are the kind of conundrums that have you announcing "Right," out loud to an empty room as you prepare your next moves. You trace wires linking switches to doors and lamps, while mentally readjusting the potential path of a jellyfish once you've raised a bridge to interrupt its regular patrol route. Timing is rarely exacting: if you find yourself just short of executing your plan to perfection, your solution is probably the wrong one. It's odd to play an Amanita game where failure doesn't come with an amusing punchline; more often than not it prompts a brief bit of shadow play as you meet your demise via tentacles or steel jaws. But nor are you simply throwing objects together until you happen across the right combination. It's not rocket science, but working out how to outmanoeuvre a shadowy double whose every step mirrors your own – at least until it turns into a coatstand – is every bit as satisfying as you'd hope.

That setting, meanwhile, ensures *Creaks* is more than a series of loosely connected puzzles. Your descent becomes ever more circuitous: you'll find yourself climbing past and looking down upon places you've already been, and even revisiting rooms that no longer look quite as they did when you were last there. The guilty party in these instances is a colossal monster of which we're afforded only occasional glimpses, a single mighty talon swatting away huge chunks of masonry with effortless force.

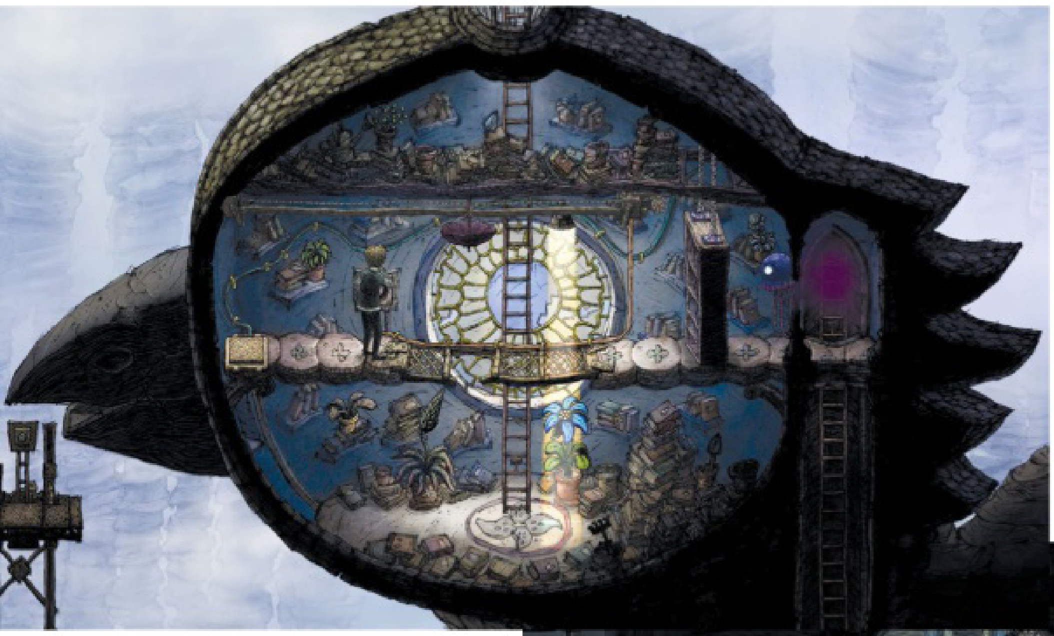
Elsewhere, the avian characters we assume are the mansion's residents – they certainly look more comfortable with the place than our nervy hero, as he peers through cracks to spy on them during the short, wordless cutscenes – similarly find themselves scrabbling for safety. The eldest appears to be after a special book that is lost after one destructive intrusion; another's repeated attempts to injure the beast are amusingly thwarted. Just enough mystery to keep you intrigued whenever you're flummoxed, in other words, and more evidence (beyond the wall-jumping goat-chair that arrives around the halfway point) that *Creaks* has enough ideas to keep the intrigue cranked from attic to basement – and possibly even beyond. ■

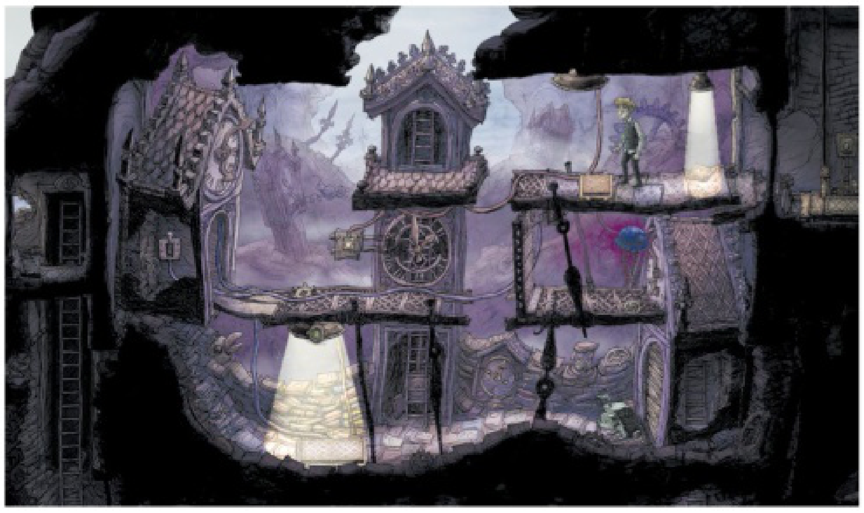
> ***It's odd to play an Amanita game where failure doesn't come with a punchline***

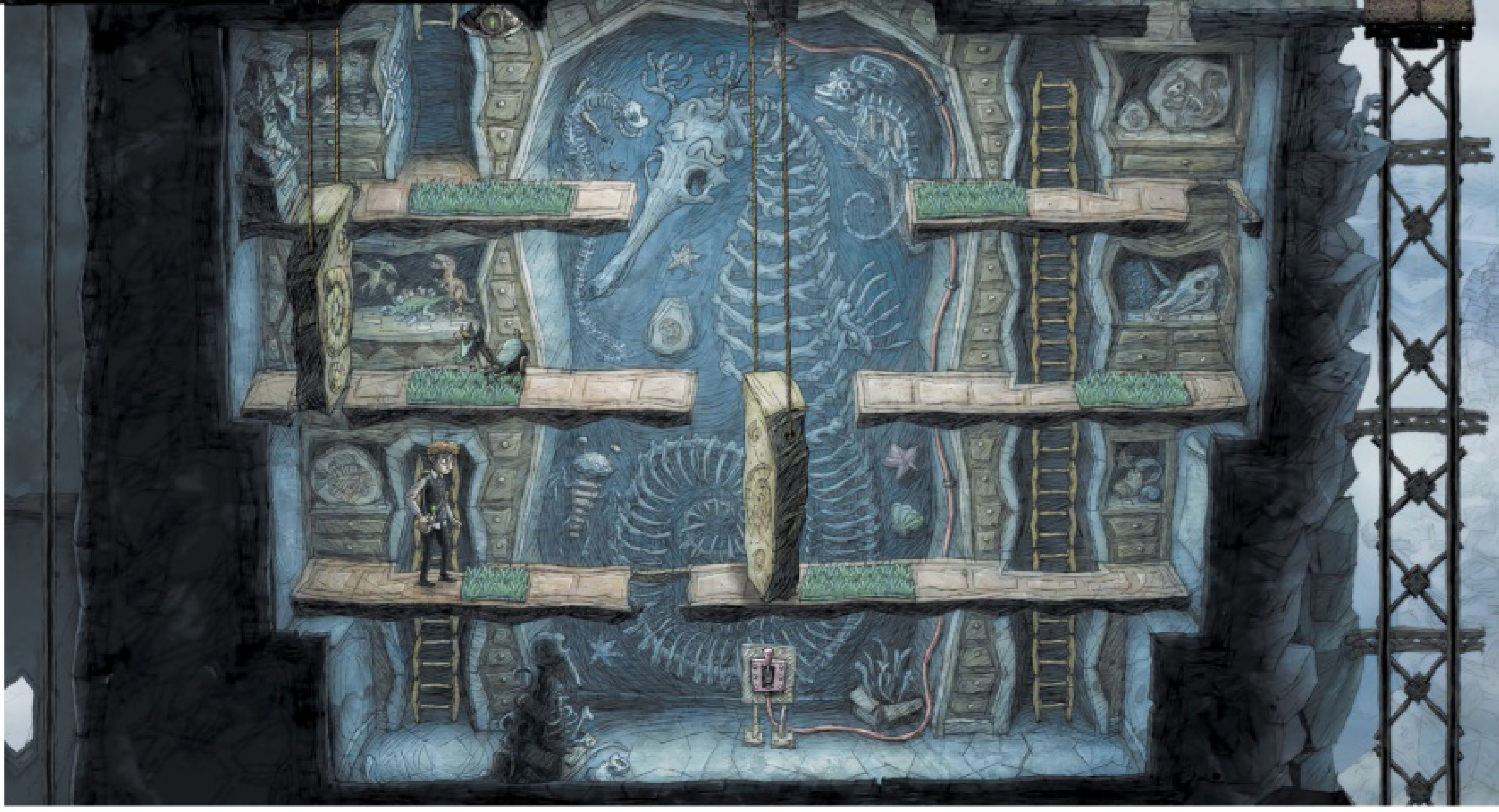


Wind-up bird chronicle

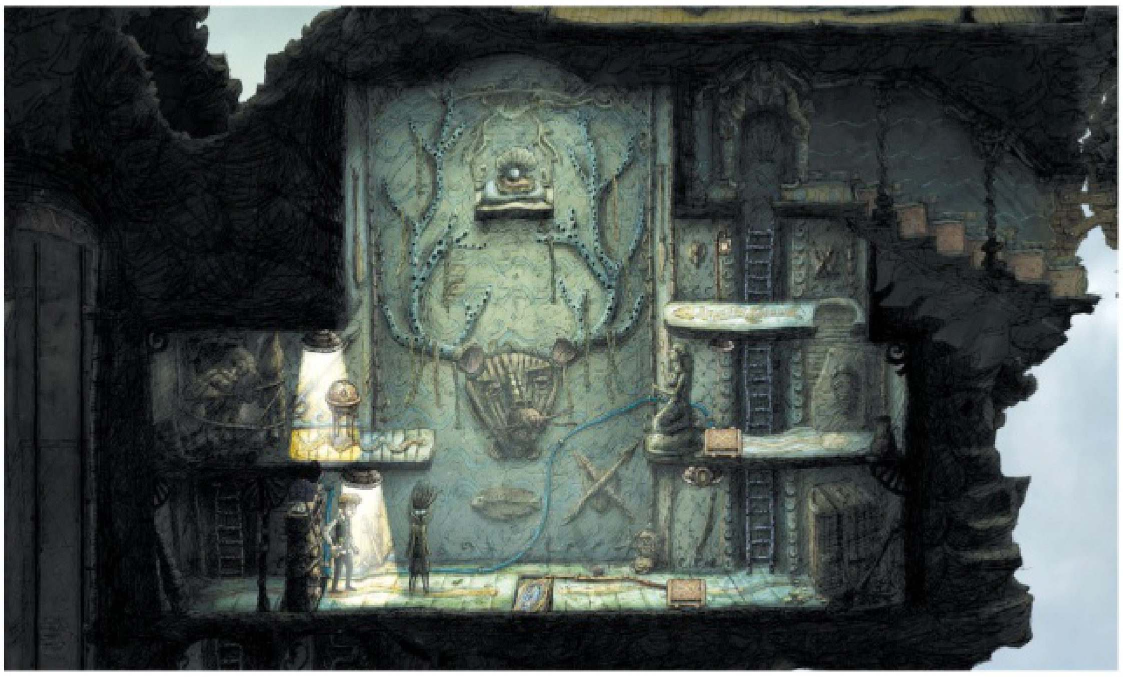
Between puzzle rooms you'll find surreal paintings – pull a drawstring to hear a music-box tune play over portraits of beaked subjects – and a series of clockwork playthings. You'll be prompted to turn a key to get them running, whereupon you'll be launched into a rudimentary minigame. In one, you need to follow the dance moves of a masked tribe or else be clonked over the head with a ladle, while another casts you as a hooded spy scooting between bushes while two quarrelling lovers are distracted. In a third you control the unwieldy gun arms of a pair of avian hunters standing back to back, as you fend off woodland creatures attacking from both sides. These delightfully silly asides are entirely optional, yet altogether irresistible.





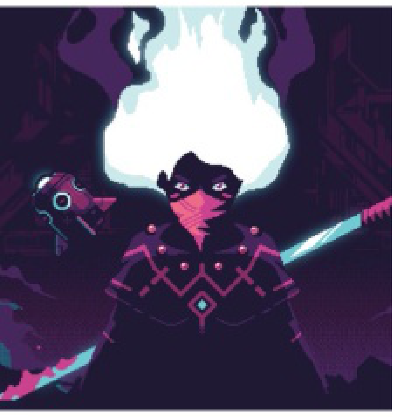


TOP **These flowers will unfurl under the light, though there are no mechanical implications to making them bloom – not yet, at any rate.**
ABOVE **If the protagonist constantly seems on edge, it's with good reason. Even in enemy-free rooms it feels like you're being watched.**
MAIN **You don't want to corner a goat while it's grazing; instead, you'll need to plot its escape route to coax it into position**



TOP **Some stages craftily force you to free trapped enemies, putting you at risk of being cornered if you don't watch their movements carefully.**
LEFT **All furniture can be dragged through lit areas, while chairs and chests of drawers can be used to reach ladders that don't come down to floor level**

Developer Flying Oak Games
Publisher Dear Villagers
Format PC, Xbox One
Origin France
Release TBA



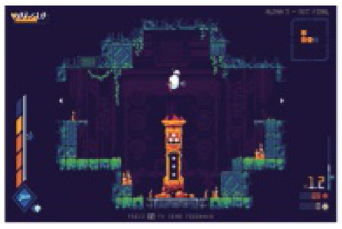
SCOURGEBRINGER

Roguelike, no gimmicks

Roguelikes might have spent 30 years as a fairly niche concern but, here at the end of the 2010s, the subgenre is so thriving that even if you only count the action games, you'll quickly drown in brilliant examples of the form – with most of them adding their own unique twist to the formula. Look at *Noita* and its destructible scenery, or *Dead Cells'* splicing with Metroidvania DNA. With so much competition out there, a good gimmick seems like the price of entry for a new Roguelike game. But *ScourgeBringer* isn't interested in any of that.

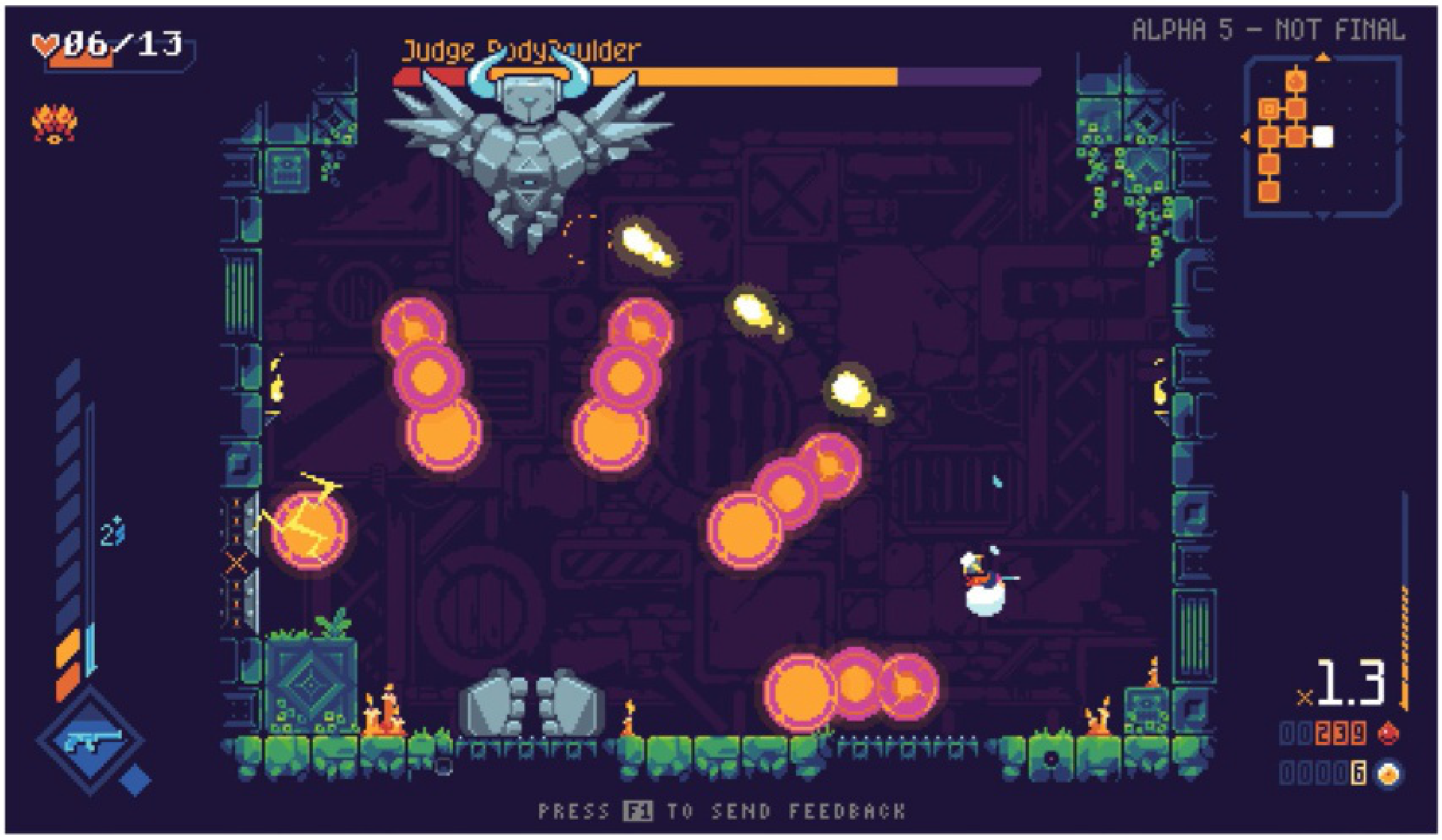
"We don't really want to focus on doing something really new or innovative," developer and game designer **Thomas Altenburger** says. "We are just focused on the game feel, and trying to do something that is very cool to play with." It's a startlingly low-concept approach to take, but one that works, simply because *ScourgeBringer* feels so good in the hands.

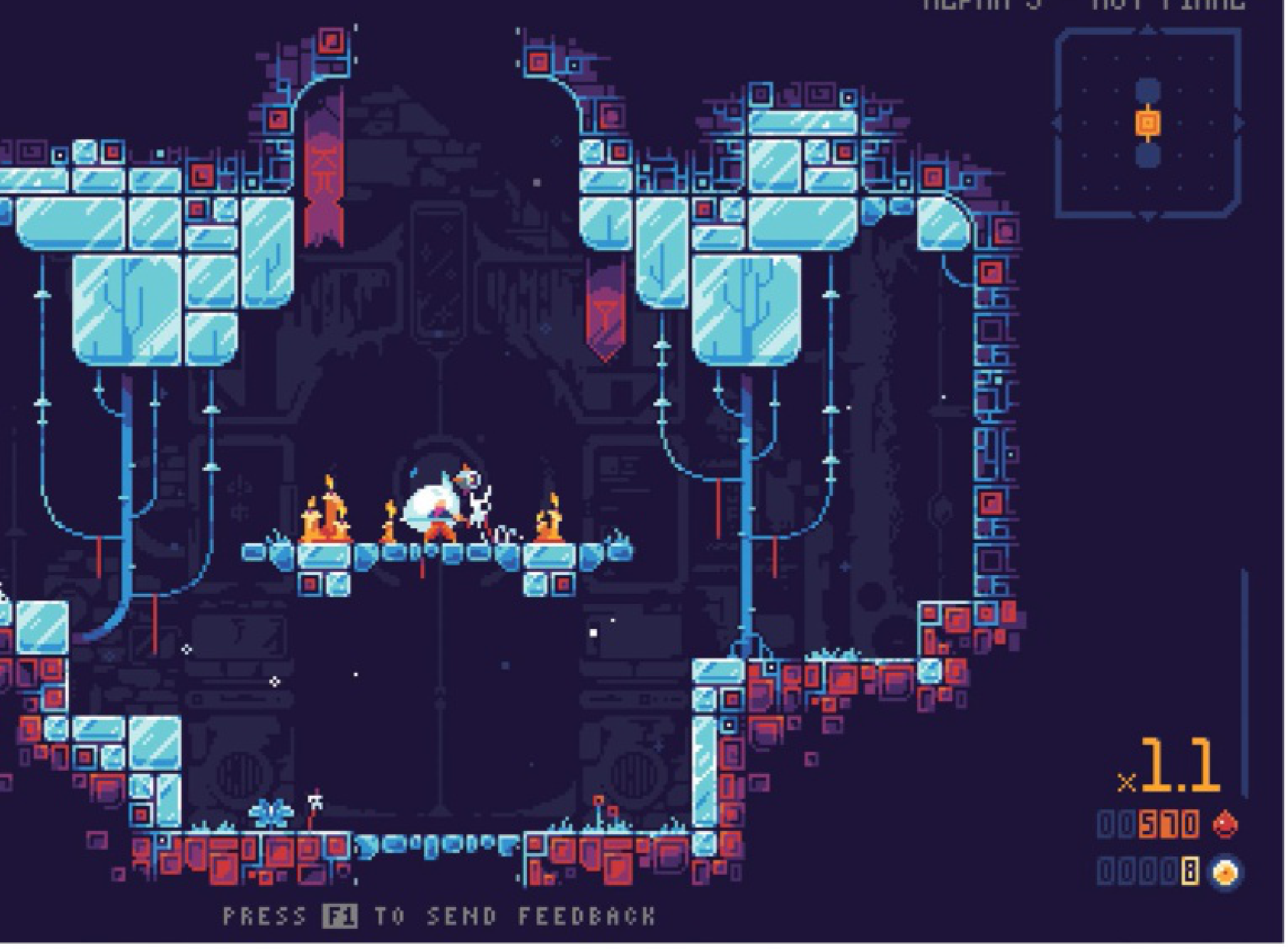
Your character, Kyhra, is incredibly nimble. She rarely needs to touch the floor – you can send her sprinting up a wall, bounce off it to land a flurry of hits on a floating enemy, then slice through the air in the direction of her next victim. And you'll find yourself doing all this within about 90 seconds of first picking up the controller.



ABOVE **In each world you'll find one station offering you a choice of upgrades. These are currently a little bland, Altenburger admits, and punching them up is high on Flying Oak's to-do list**

Each world has a miniboss halfway through; beating it unlocks the exit to the area's final boss. There's currently one of each, but the plan is to mix it up by release





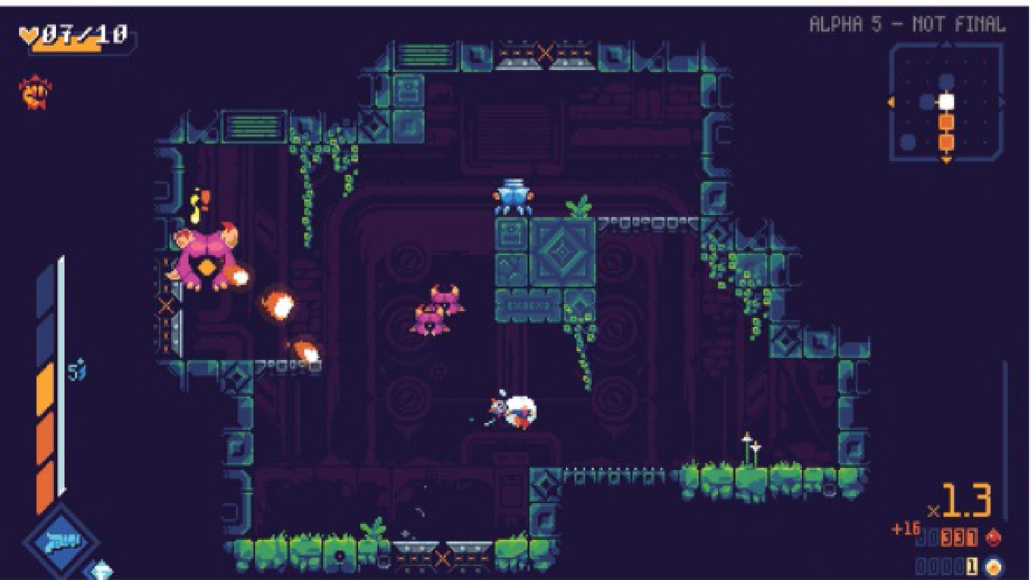
LEFT **The layout of a world is procedurally generated, meaning sometimes you'll get a sprawl of rooms, while at other times they might just be stacked vertically, in a single column**

(There are mouse and keyboard controls, but *ScourgeBringer* feels much more at home on thumbsticks and triggers.)

Altenburger tells us the dev team at Flying Oak Games spent almost a year of development time just honing movement and combat, with the likes of *Celeste*, *Devil May Cry* and, inevitably, *Dead Cells* their key reference points. The connection between those three very different games is their sense of momentum, and *ScourgeBringer*'s combat is all about how each attack carries you forward to the next. Enemies have a slight magnetism to them, meaning Kyhra will cling to them in the air as long as you keep hammering the light attack. A heavy slash will do more damage – and even inflict a stun if timed just right – but it also pushes your enemy further away, forcing you to close the distance all over again, perhaps by launching Kyhra forward with a dash, or else bring them down with a couple of shots from her gun drone.

The team spent almost a year of development time just honing movement and combat

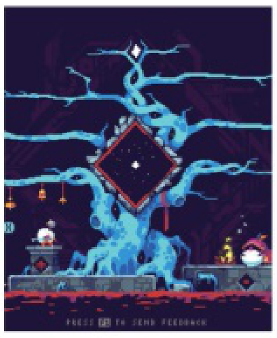
The moment before an enemy starts spewing bullets, an exclamation mark appears above their head. This is your window to close in and stun them – or else get ready to dodge



The scaffolding that sits around these moments, though, is still noticeably incomplete. We're playing an alpha build, as Flying Oak prepares for an early access launch next year, and most of the actual content – levels and enemies and such – has yet to be filled in. "This is mostly, like, the backbone for now," Altenburger confirms. The plan is to vary the kinds of things you can encounter in the world, so it's not just shops, combat encounters and bosses, but that's a project for early access.

For now, this means a lot of repetition. There are two worlds out of a planned six currently available, with noticeably finite variety in each of those. The game breaks down each world into individual rooms, with procedural generation just shuffling the tiles between runs. "Every room is handcrafted, because we want to have fine control over the environmental design," Altenburger says. It's a smart decision, because the combat requires carefully tweaked sightlines and chokepoints to work – but does mean that within an hour or two we're intimately familiar with some of these spaces, and the waves of enemies they contain. We lose count of how many times we've slain the first area's mid-level boss somewhere in the high double digits.

That we keep coming back to it anyway, telling ourselves we 'just need to check' something in between paragraphs and inevitably getting sucked back in for a run or two, is testament to just how good it feels to unleash Kyhra's particular set of skills. If Flying Oak can build a structure to support that, *ScourgeBringer* could be the rare Roguelike which thrives even without a strong conceptual hook. ■

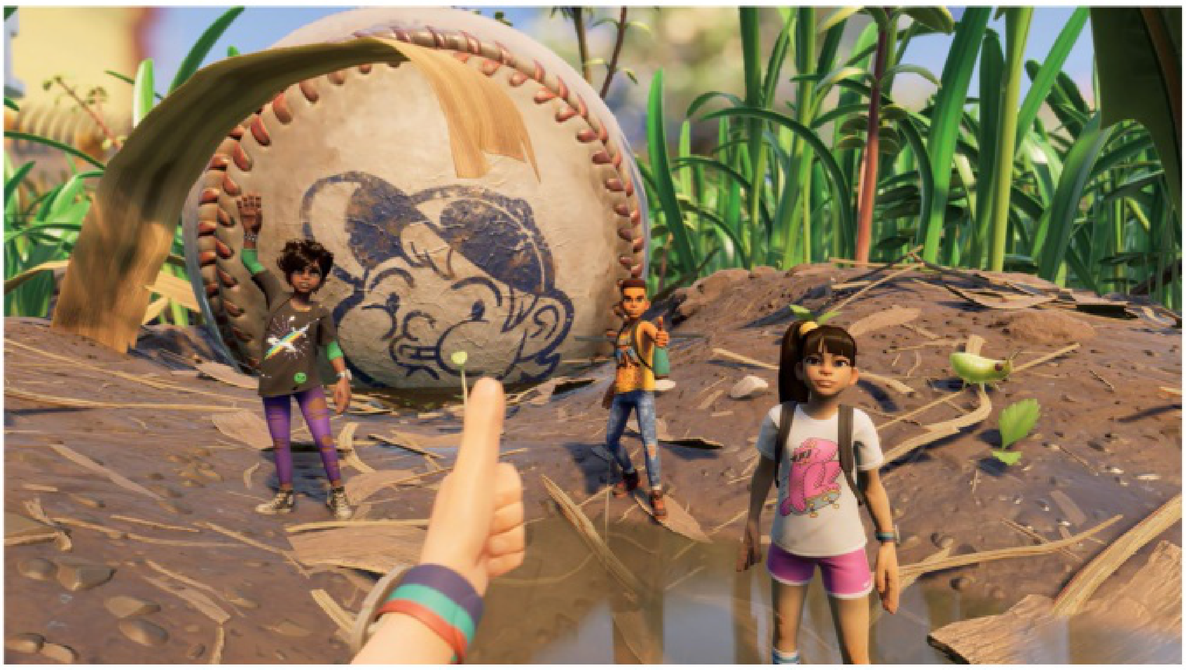


Best of your abilities

When you die in *ScourgeBringer*, you don't necessarily lose everything. Beating a boss will reward you with currency that can be invested between lives into the game's skill tree to unlock everything from fast travel to a better starting gun. "If you have a game that is all about die and retry, and there is nothing that carries over, a lot of frustration can arise," says Altenburger. But the essentials of combat are available right from the start, and these add-ons aren't necessary to beat the game. "We don't want to make permanent upgrades that are going to, like, double your HP or your damage. We want more to add diversity into the game. It's about adding more options."

GROUNDED

Developer Obsidian Entertainment **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Format** PC, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** 2020



With spacebound action-RPG *The Outer Worlds* shipped, Obsidian turns its hand to another oversubscribed genre of PC game. *Grounded*, however, stands apart from the other million or so early-access survival games out there with a cute, cartoonish aesthetic, and by being based on a group of teenagers who've been shrunk to the size of insects. You'll manage thirst and hunger with dewdrops from grass blades and spit-roasted bugs. The world is physically based and fully interactable; insects form a true ecosystem, working together and against each other as in the real world. A fascinating start to Obsidian's life within Microsoft.

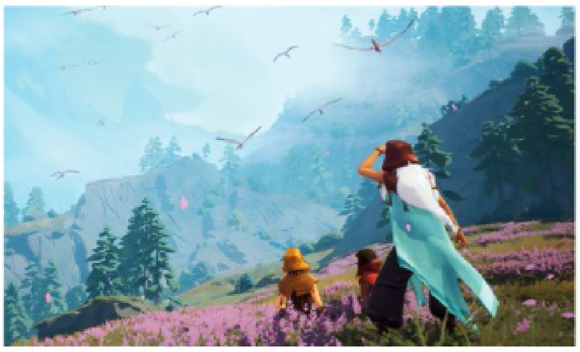
STREET FIGHTER V: CHAMPION EDITION

Developer/publisher Capcom **Format** PC, PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** February 14

This is more surprising than the title might suggest: we'd heard rumours Capcom was to show a first glimpse of *Street Fighter VI* before the year was out. This bundling together of all *SFV* content to date – 40 characters, 34 stages, and over 200 costumes – surely puts the kybosh on that, however. Another year's worth of characters will follow, beginning with *Street Fighter III* boss Gil; the existing cast also gets some love, with each receiving an additional V-Skill move.

EVERWILD

Developer Rare **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format TBA **Origin** UK **Release** TBA



Rare returns to dry land for its next project, and what an alluring shore it is, a beautiful forest where cloaked humans stalk cautiously around the local fauna. Rare admits it's still early days, and development will run parallel to its ongoing work on *Sea Of Thieves*, but we're already intrigued.

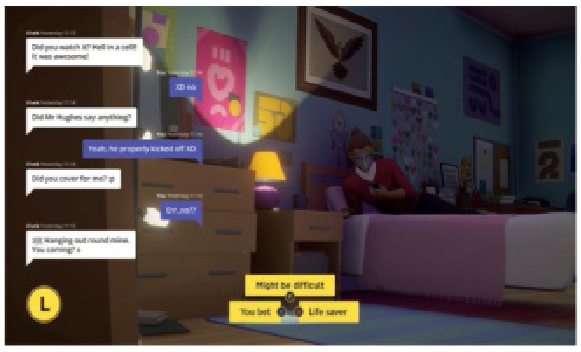
TELL ME WHY

Developer Dontnod Entertainment **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One **Origin** France **Release** 2020

This marks an evolution for Dontnod's episodic oeuvre in a couple of ways. It's the studio's – and, it claims, the industry's – first game to feature a transgender protagonist. Dontnod has heard the feedback to its previously laggardly release schedule: all three episodes will launch in the middle of 2020.

LAST STOP

Developer Variable State **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, Xbox One (others TBA) **Origin** UK **Release** 2020



Variable State's FBI drama *Virginia* was an Annapurna game before its time, so it's no surprise to see who's publishing the follow-up. Set in London, *Last Stop* tells three interconnecting stories, with body-swapping, supernatural horror, detective work and a healthy dose of sex and violence. Sign us up.

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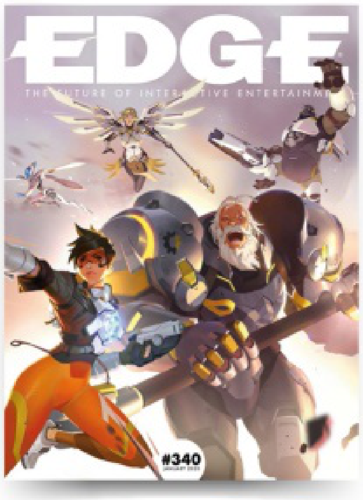

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56 Back In The Fight

72 An Audience With… Aaron Keller

80 The Great Journey

86 The Making Of… Sayonara Wild Hearts

92 Studio Profile: 11 Bit Studios

124 Time Extend: The Sims

BACK IN T

Blizzard gambled when it announced *Overwatch 2*, a sort-of sequel without a release date. But it might pay off: right now the world needs heroes

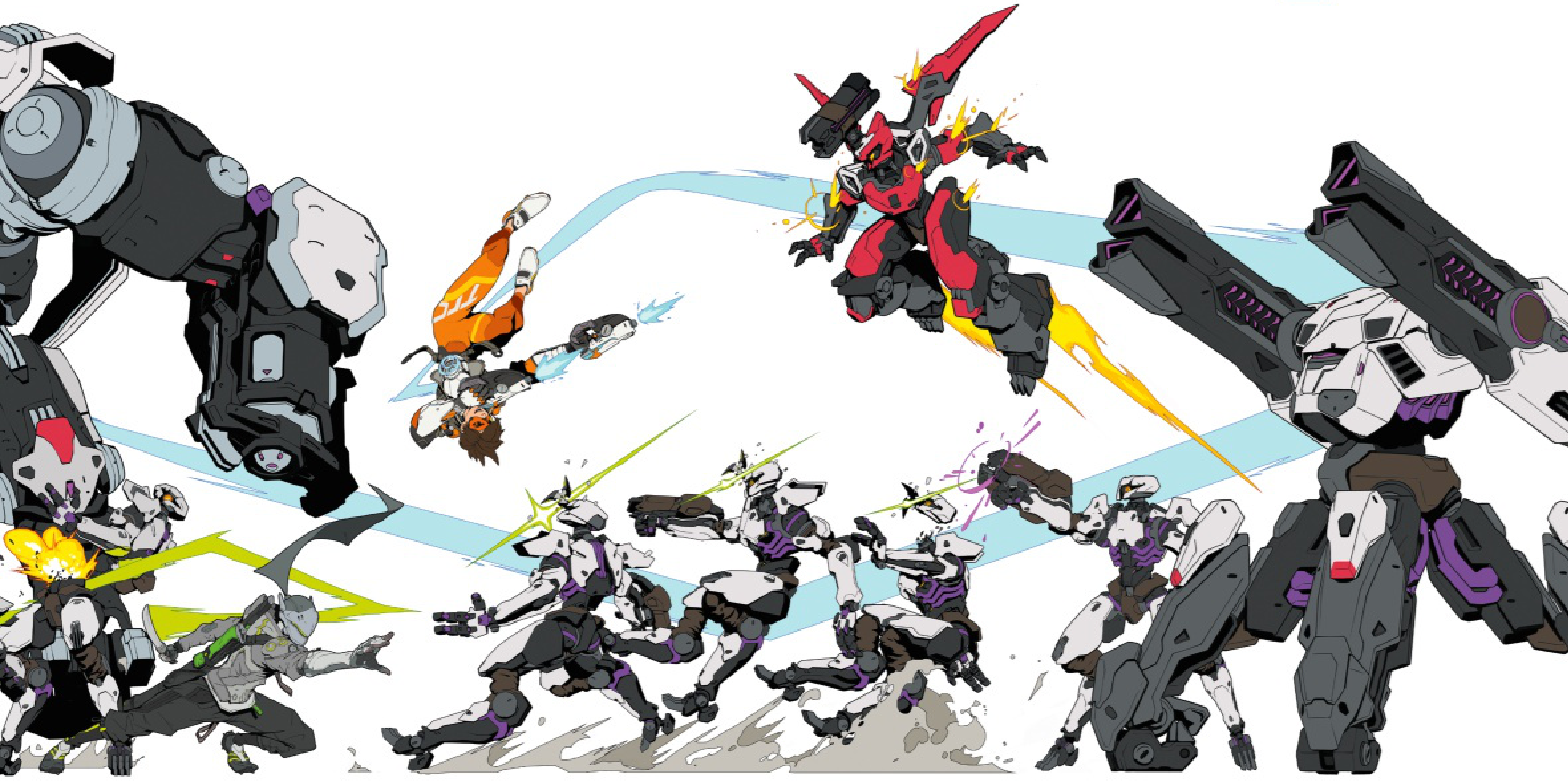
By Dom Peppiatt

There aren't many games like *Overwatch*. It's utopian in its outlook – uplifting, optimistic, full of hope and promise. *Overwatch*'s world is one in which people come together and work in unison to achieve a common goal. Whether it's in the game's fiction or in the competitive gaming scene that's blossomed around the fledgling series, *Overwatch* has become a symbol of unity, of confidence, of positivity.

And that's no accident. "One of the things that brought me to *Overwatch* and made me want to join the team here at Blizzard was the message of inclusivity and hope that's built into the game," explains **Julia Humphreys**, production director on *Overwatch 2*. "The idea that you can look for yourself and try to find yourself in this roster of heroes appealed to me so much… I think that roster really encompasses a broad spectrum of what it means to be a human being on this planet."

Overwatch's 31-character strong roster is, we daresay, one of the most diverse in gaming. It presents heroes from all around the world, of multiple ethnicities, gender identities and sexual orientations,

Game *Overwatch 2*
Developer/publisher
Blizzard Entertainment
Format PC, PS4,
Switch, Xbox One
Release TBA



HE FIGHT

uniting to suppress a common threat. These heroes, the crux of *Overwatch*'s appeal, have been the headline feature of the game since its launch in 2016, but their stories have been sidelined. Tucked away in comics, shown in flashy animated shorts or drip-fed in bizarre ARGs, Blizzard has kept *Overwatch* lore out of the spotlight where possible. But with *Overwatch 2*, all that is about to change.

Overwatch 2 will be introducing Story missions to the game. Each of these new missions, which will see the *Overwatch* heroes travel the world searching for the source of the robotic Null Sector incursion, is bookended with a pair of cinematic shorts. These will use the likable cast to tell a Pixar-like story, putting Blizzard's best-in-class production values front and centre to finally – *finally* – provide more insight into some of the most iconic gaming personalities of the past decade.

"Since the very beginning of *Overwatch*, we've wanted to do this," explains **John Lafleur**, technical director on the project. "Since the beginning of the project, we've been incredibly jealous as we watched the Story And Franchise department create these beautiful cinematics for the *Overwatch* universe – and now we get to do that, too."

Blizzard has a central team that creates the cinematics and trailers for the majority of its projects: the Story And Franchise department. Though it works closely with the game-development teams, it's this orbital unit that dresses up the infamous Blizzard cinematics, that composes the stories that can be dished out in digestible chunks.

We've had animated shorts that have revolved around some of the most popular *Overwatch* characters – D.Va, Hanzo and Genji, Mei, Soldier 76, McCree and more besides – in the past, but with *Overwatch 2*, Blizzard has a newfound confidence. It's taking the narrative from the periphery and moving it into the spotlight.

"We're excited to finally tell a story in this game – our players are rabid for it," Humphreys laughs. "They consume it in all manner of forms: animated shorts, comics, books and wherever else. We want to keep supporting the story in all forms, but to have the opportunity to actively take part in telling that story, that's something we're passionate about." ▶

Each hero will get their own chance to take the spotlight as Blizzard takes us on a world tour – and with such a diverse and interesting cast, that's a tantalising prospect

ABOVE **The Null Sector robot enemy design is clean and white so it pops more notably against the *Overwatch 2* maps, where each zone is designed around a 'wash' of colour**

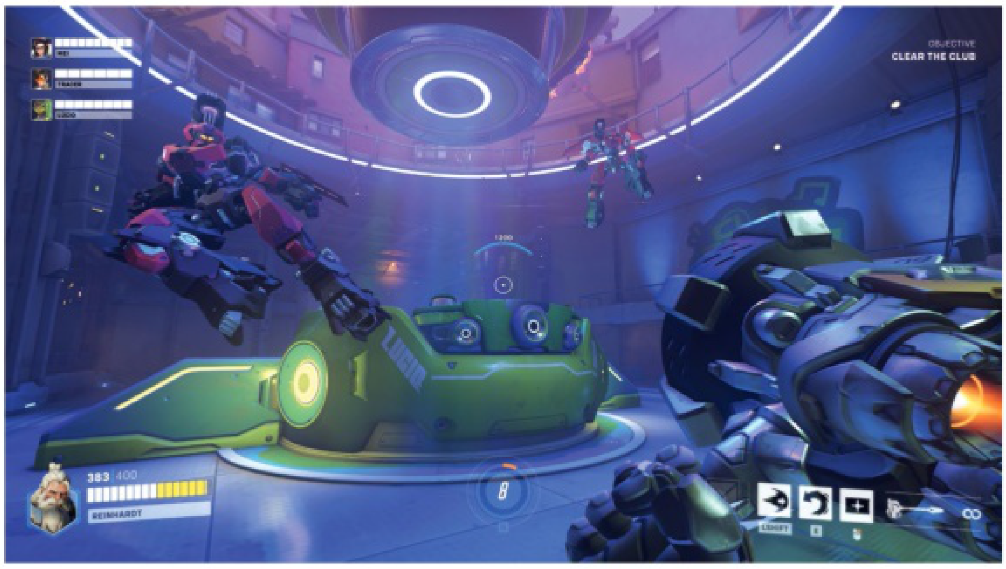
From what we've seen so far – a single mission set in rollerblading healer Lucio's hometown, Rio de Janeiro – that passion comes through. The closest thing we can compare it to is a *Destiny* Strike: you've got a team of four predetermined heroes pushing through a map that gives you a series of objectives. And a lot of cannon fodder. Using your now-customisable abilities, some tight communication and a lot of firepower, you can wrap one of these missions up in about half an hour.

The level design is unlike anything we've seen in *Overwatch* before, too. Previously, we've had maps that lean on one colour profile in order to create a harmonious, non-confusing background. Maps are made with 'washes' of colour – making the bright, well-defined character silhouettes pop over the top. Temple Of Anubis, for example, is all about gold: you've got gold relics, golden sands, golden sunlight on stone. When you've got to keep track of 11 other players at any one time, these maps are perfect: sightlines, vantage points and bottlenecks all work as they're designed to, and there's some visual flavour there to make them interesting, even on your 700th skirmish on that map.

But the new maps for Story mode are easily twice as big as anything that's appeared in *Overwatch* before. They are still connected by one central theme, but are zoned off to better control rhythm and pace. That 'colour wash' the design team loves so much is still present, but you might get five different kinds of wash in one map instead of one. It weaves a story together – subconsciously communicating progression, danger, respite, unease.

These missions play well, but they're nothing new. It's nice to get to play *Overwatch* in a cooperative way outside one of the game's seasonal modes, sure, but these missions aren't going to change the world. It's the characterisation in them that make them worth playing. One of the most delightful design touches in *Overwatch* has always been the context-based character interactions – Torbjörn and Reinhardt bantering with each other in the spawn room before the start of each round, cyborg ninja Genji thanking Mercy for bringing him back to life "again" if a

BELOW **The Story levels we play at Blizzcon remind us of *Destiny*'s Strikes – zone-based skirmishes that knit together to form a cohesive narrative experience**



THE NEW MAPS ARE EASILY TWICE AS BIG AS ANYTHING THAT'S APPEARED IN OVERWATCH BEFORE

teammate uses her Resurrect ability on him during play – that helped flesh out certain relationships and story beats. *Overwatch 2*'s story missions make the absolute most of the idea. Watching Brazilian DJ-cum-freedom fighter Lucio seeing his favourite record store get blown up as you fight to save Rio de Janeiro is surprisingly motivating. Listening to the still-uncertain Mei discover her confidence as she finds her feet as part of the core *Overwatch* team is heartwarming. Hearing Tracer spout silly Britishisms as she formulates a plan of attack – it all weaves together to give a more complete idea of what *Overwatch* is, of what function these characters serve in this world.

Blizzard has even gone into the engine to make this more subtle kind of storytelling work in-game. Jeff Kaplan – director of what is now the *Overwatch* series – tells us the engine has been retooled so the development team can focus on intimate storytelling, on making the characters' faces more expressive. It's all getting very Disney, and that works wonders for a game that prides itself on its characters.

"A lot of what we wanted to do was to be able to get those really close-up, emotional reactions from characters in the Story missions," explains Lafleur. "We've never really had the chance to do that before. Now, all the new tech and art we've put in has been to ensure that it's possible to tell a story with a character, with their face."

There's a cinematic at the end of the Rio de Janeiro level designed almost exclusively to show this off. The *Overwatch* team shuts down a Null Sector dropship that's been pumping Omnic (again, read: robot) forces into the city. A very 'third act'-feeling escape plays out, seeing Tracer, Reinhardt and Mei escape the clutches of the enemy. But Mei, still plagued by self-doubt about her worth in a legendary, world-saving outfit like Overwatch, watches as Lucio gets caught in the blast and the ship goes down. Her mouth wobbles, her eyes grow wide, she calls out in distress. It's over in a flash, but it leaves an impact. It's clear Blizzard has invested a lot in the new facial animations, in the new geometry and rigging that's been overhauled to make the characters' eyes more expressive. ▶

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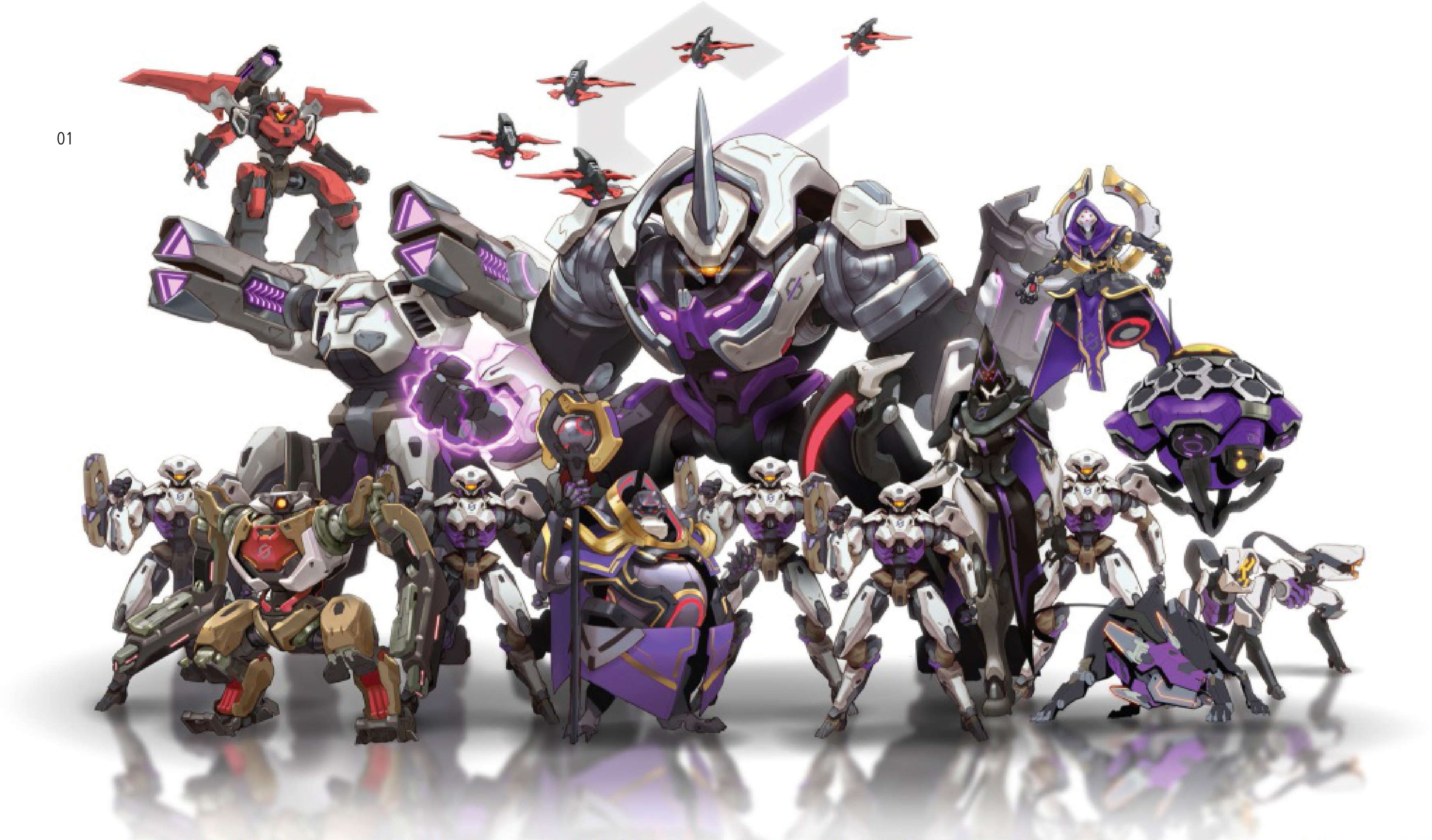

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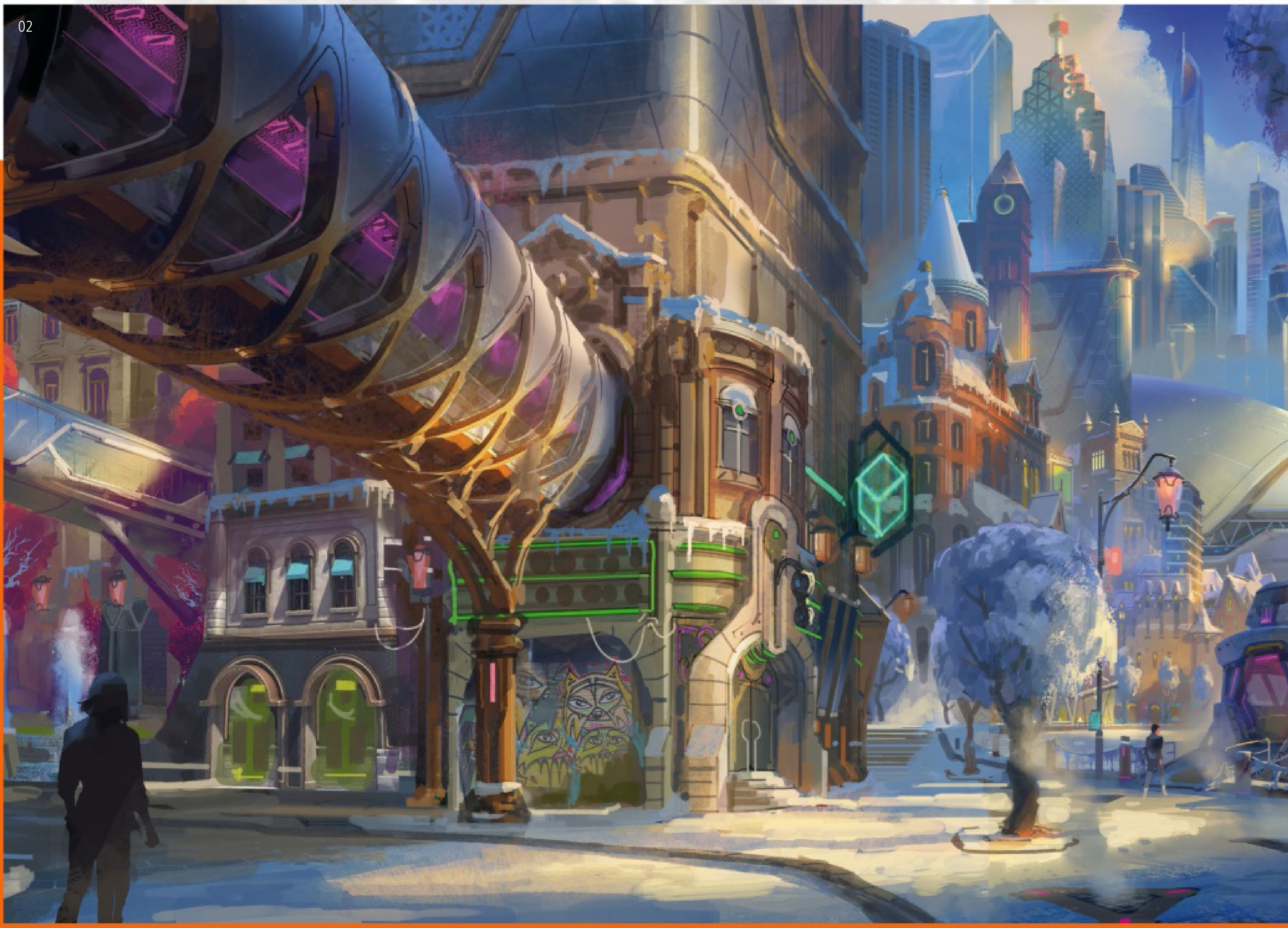

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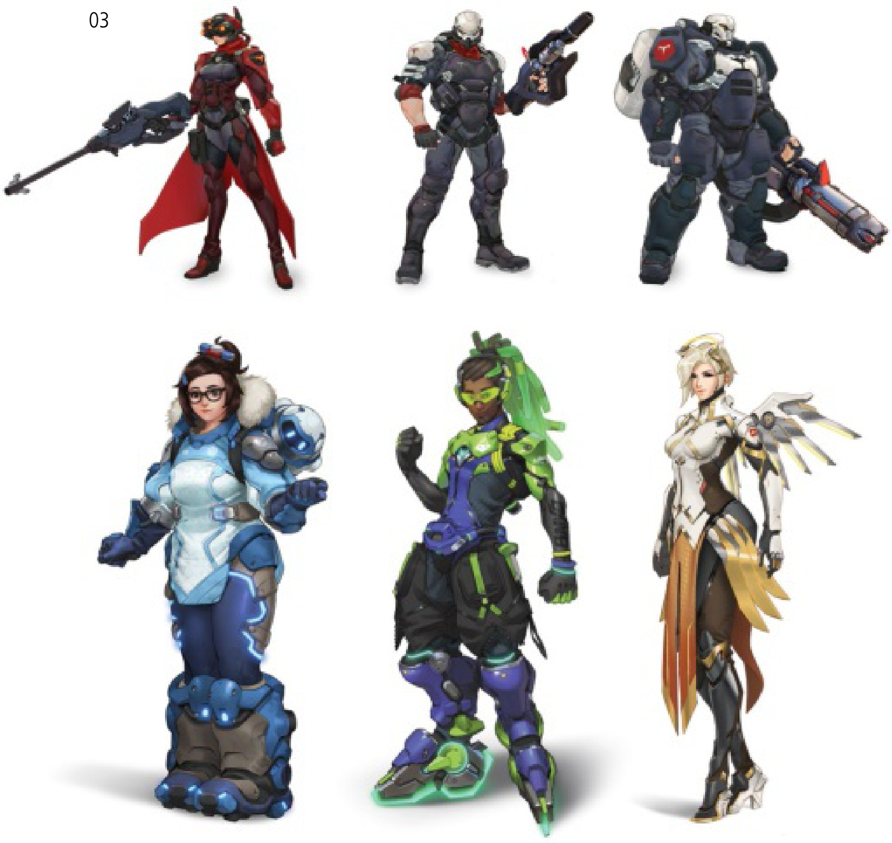

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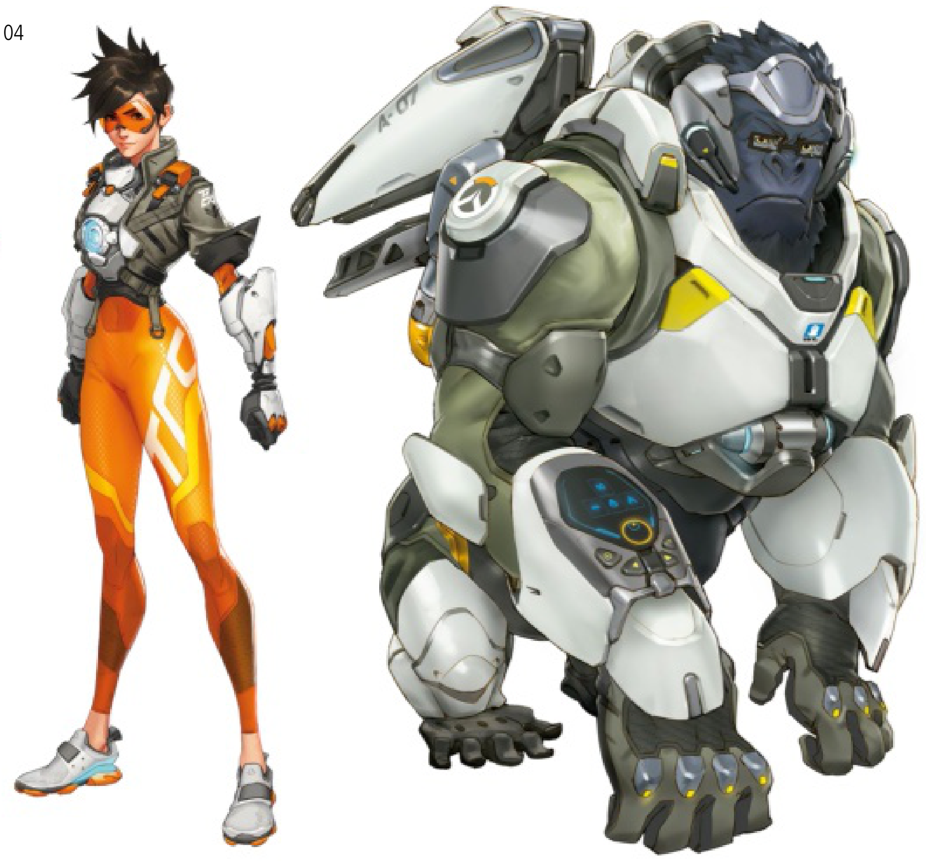
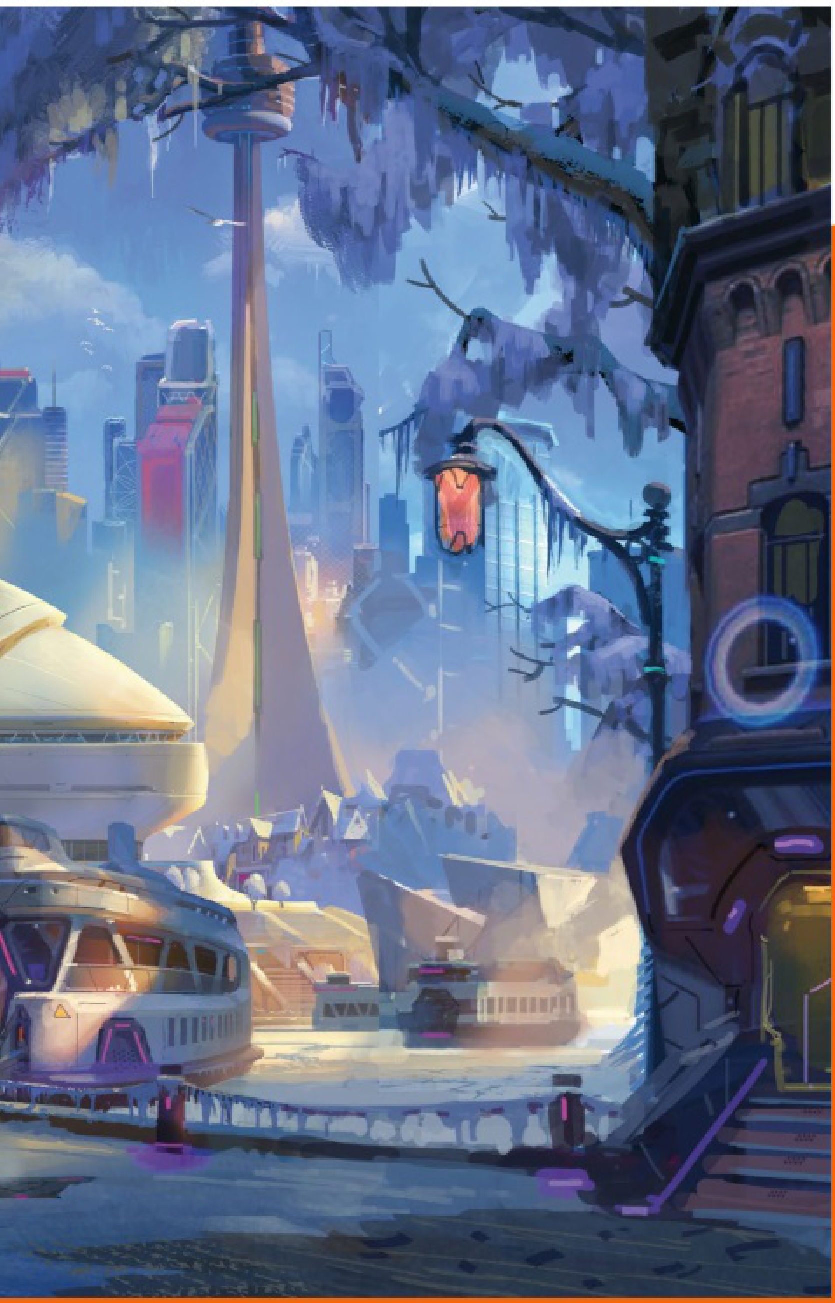
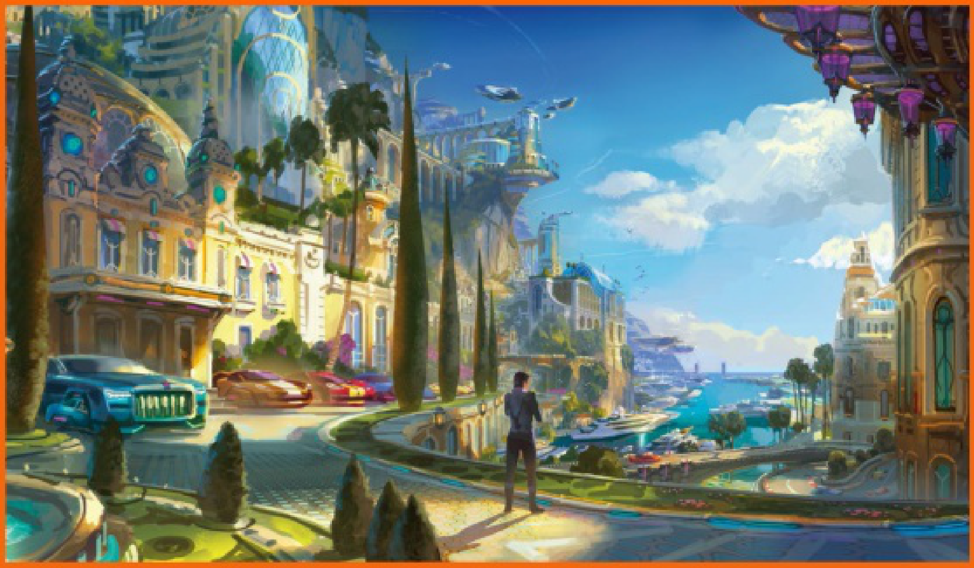




IT'S CLEAR BLIZZARD HAS INVESTED A LOT IN THE NEW FACIAL ANIMATIONS, IN THE NEW GEOMETRY

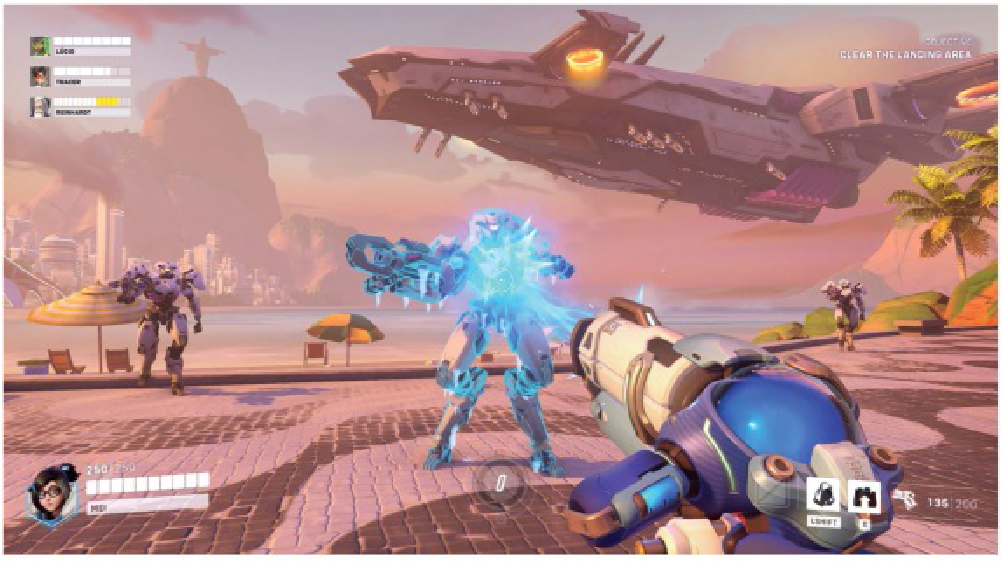


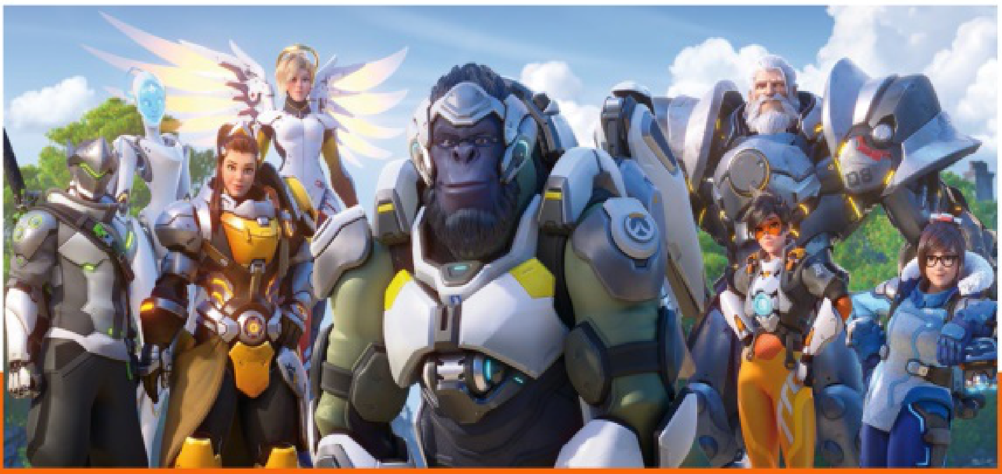
01 **Null Sector will be just one of the opposing forces trying to stop Overwatch's heroics as the freshly reformed team starts to find its feet.**

02 **Red maple leaves, snowy streets and modern technology mixing with classic architecture: Blizzard's first interpretation of Toronto doesn't disappoint.**

03 **You won't just be battling robots as Talon counts many human recruits among its members, and they dislike Overwatch intensely.**

04 **At launch, all 31 *Overwatch* characters will have seen a slight redesign – marking chronological and emotional progress since the launch of the first game** ▶





ABOVE **The first *Overwatch 2* cinematic, where Winston is joined by members of the team, was in no small way inspired by Marvel, with Humphreys calling the initial assembly of heroes "a real Avengers moment"**

"We don't do technology for technology's sake. That's a Blizzard motto," Lafleur says. "Rarely will we do a technical demo unless we feel it's going to serve the game. But there's a lot of things we've changed for *Overwatch 2* – shadows and lighting are far more dynamic, screen space and occlusion is much better defined than it was before and so on. But everything we've changed has been done to serve the game, and to serve the story we're trying to tell."

That said, Blizzard is very much aware that you can't just crowbar any old story into a game world-famous for its PvP and have people lap it up. If anything, the audience is going to be more critical of the story than ever. Marvel, DC and the comics culture heavyweights have normalised these high-stakes, action-led narratives in cinema, but making an interactive story where the world is in danger and only you can save it? That requires a rather different approach. *Overwatch* is known, after all, for its tight and endlessly replayable multiplayer action. You wouldn't want a bloated and predictable story to undermine that.

"One thing that's important to us is that we don't let the story drive the game to a point where it won't be fun for the player," Lafleur says. "The first thing about all of our games is that the gameplay has to be fun. We were very careful to make sure that, as we crafted the story, every element of it would make for an interesting mission or interesting gameplay for the players. You can't just tell a typical story when you're thinking like that – that won't make for a very good game. But it's something we're used to doing at Blizzard, and the help of Story And Franchise has been great for that."

Every new chapter comes with new characters, at least in the *Overwatch* world. The game launched with just 21 heroes – we've seen that roster swell by ten more in three years. You can rest assured that more will come with *Overwatch 2* (Sojourn, the first black woman in the game, has been confirmed; fan-favourite flying android Echo, meanwhile, turned up in an *Overwatch 2* animated short, and from Kaplan's past comments seems all but set to become a playable character in the sequel). In fact, Blizzard tells us that

BUILD TO ORDER

In Hero Missions and Story mode, your hero will be different from someone else's thanks to new custom abilities you can apply at various levels. One of Tracer's Level One options, for example, is Adaptive Reload: her guns automatically refill the second you use any of her abilities. This makes the "cadence of firing" (Blizzard's words, not ours) more intense. Play her right and you'll never have to reload. But then there's Chain Reaction – it's more powerful because it kills all nearby enemies, but it's centred on her Super, so you'll see it in action less. Mei can select Cold Snap, allowing her Cryo-Freeze to snap-freeze any enemies in the proximity when it ends. Or she can equip Snowball Effect, where she turns herself into a snowball to knock down any enemies in her path. Internally, Blizzard calls this "bowling for robots". Essentially, Blizzard wants you to make builds – and it wants you to try and break the game. A Torbjörn build – with a combo of My Babies! and Flamethrower – allows him to place three little flamethrowers, rather than one central chaingun. It's a good job it won't be available in PvP play.

it wants the multiplayer meta to be 'in chaos' when the new game launches – the studio wants the competitive scene to be in as much disarray as it was when Blizzard first added D.Va, Mei and Genji into the beta back in the day.

Aside from the pair of aforementioned Overwatch allies, who else can we expect to join in on the action? Nothing is confirmed yet, but it sounds as though Blizzard isn't ruling out more outlandish designs. "Every so often, we'll do this thing where we'll get everyone on the team to just go 'Crazy hero ideas – let's go!'" Lafleur laughs. "Everyone will do a thumbnail of what the hero might be, what their abilities might be, and once – just entirely in jest – someone even came up with a hero that was a pizza. So we get some crazy ideas out of these sessions.

"We do it because it's a great time to burn off steam, but we do get some great ideas out of these meetings. We still have some of these ideas, actually, that are back-burnered."

Perhaps *Overwatch*'s most out-there character so far was born out of one of these meetings. Wrecking Ball – piloted by an overgrown hamster called Hammond – was a blue-sky long-shot character at one point, but Blizzard found a way to make it work in the tight gears of *Overwatch* meta. "Anything is possible for these heroes," Lafleur acknowledges. "What drives us to them is simply, 'What is their story, and what is the message we're trying to get across with them? What could their abilities be?' When those three things go together and we have a nice story that everyone engages with, suddenly it gels and we can start making plans to put it into the game. But there's little pieces of all kinds of things we play around with."

Whatever new heroes are going to land in *Overwatch 2* will no doubt complement the freshly redesigned roster, too. Arnold Tsang, assistant art director on *Overwatch 2*, tells us that even though the sequel is designed to redefine *Overwatch*, the heroes still need to be identifiable – after all, players have spent hundreds of hours knowing exactly where to shoot these character models. Blizzard doesn't want to invalidate years of fine-tuned muscle memory. ▶

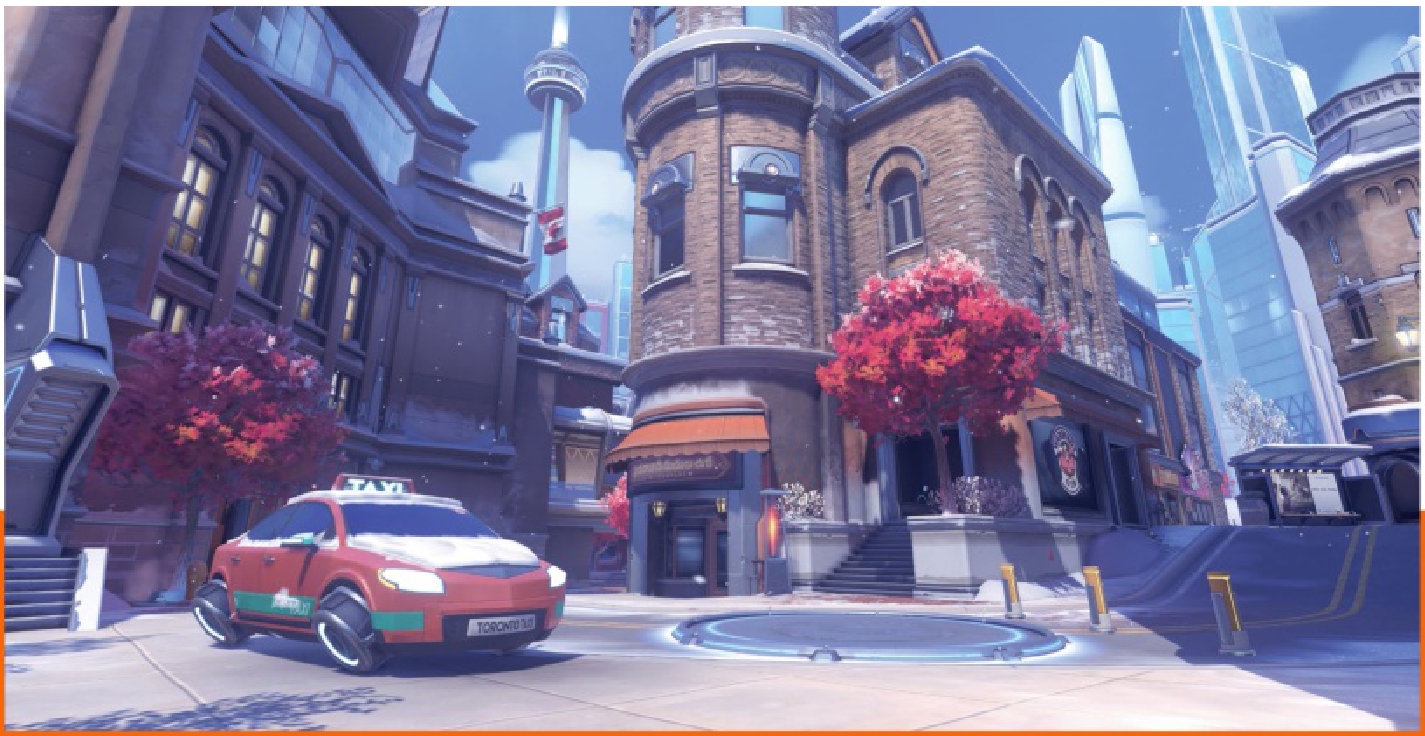
02

Revisions to the engine, plus a new rigging system for the heroes' eyes, means Blizzard has more freedom in how it conveys emotions wordlessly

BELOW **Blizzard has kept environmental design subtle until this point. But with the new Story missions, the level designers get a chance to flex their creative muscles**

BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

***Overwatch 2* and its hopeful, enthusiastic view of the world has to coexist with *Diablo IV*. The two games form a dichotomy, two polarised entities needing to find a balance within the Blizzard ecosystem. And as Allen Adham – executive producer on *Diablo IV* and one of Blizzard's founding members – tells us, that can be a difficult line to tread. "Back in the days of *Diablo* and *Diablo II*, we could get away with our darker tone because there was no *Overwatch*. Now *Overwatch* is out, it's invited this new audience into our family, and many of its players are younger… so how do we exist as a mature, dark, gory IP alongside *Overwatch*? It's a challenge." Even if the developers find themselves in a more tricky position, Blizzard as a whole benefits from this duality. "Think about it from a holistic Blizzard point of view, and it's a treat. It's nice to be able to position our games on either side of the spectrum," Adham says. "I love *Overwatch* and its optimistic view of the world, and I love our dark, hopeless view of the world. I think the existence of each can coexist and it's good for players that we've got two such extreme ends of the spectrum."**



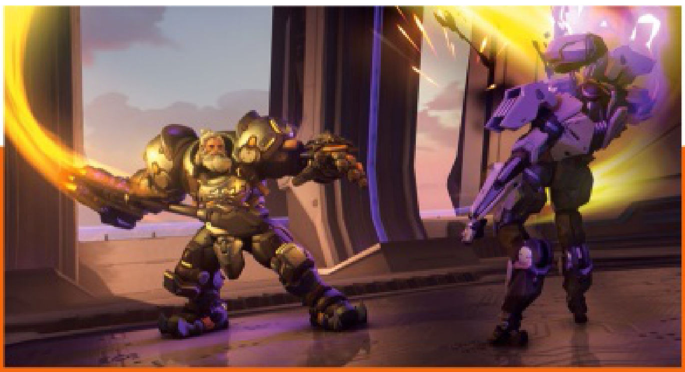
"It's important to us that our characters are immediately recognisable to everyone," Humphreys explains. "People know and love these characters, and we want to make sure they maintain the relationship they've had with them so far. We talk a lot internally about drawing inspiration from other sources – just look at the superhero characters over the years.

"Jeff Kaplan has talked about Batman, but I'm more of a Marvel person, so I prefer to think about Iron Man, right? He's had a lot of looks over the years, across the comics, the Marvel movies and whatever else. But every time you look at him, you know that's Iron Man – there's never any confusion. But as a fan, there's a lot of excitement and attachment in seeing how that character has evolved over the years. And that's something we're excited to do with our heroes as well. We want the visual appearance to represent not only the upgrades from a technical standpoint – what they've done to their armour and so on – but also the progression of time in the story."

It's the little details that make *Overwatch*'s subtle storytelling so noteworthy. Reinhardt – the big German tank who's best described as an 'engine-powered knight' – had the number '08' painted onto his armour in the first game. In the sequel, thanks to the talents of Swedish support character and adept engineer Brigitte, he's upgraded, now sporting '09' on his suit.

But there's more to the story. Back in Project Titan (the game *Overwatch* used to be before Blizzard retooled it), there was a huge character called Juggernaut. By the time the development team got to the eighth design iteration of Juggernaut, Blizzard took the character concepts from Titan and slotted them into a prototype version of *Overwatch*. Juggernaut became Reinhardt on his eighth pass, and that number on his shoulder was a homage to that. Now Brigitte gets to carry that legacy forward.

Elsewhere, you'll see characters such as Bastion and Torbjörn – who didn't pick up Winston's recall request to rejoin *Overwatch* – and they're a lot more casual in appearance than they were back in the first



“AT A CHARACTER LEVEL, EVERYONE IN OVERWATCH HAS SOMETHING TO BRING TO THE TEAM”

game. Bastion, for some reason, has even taken Torbjörn’s cap – a preposterous-looking thing for a robot with a barely recognisable face to do. And yet it’s a decision that’s charming, unique, and oozing with character.

These little human touches, this talent for delivering narrative through these tiny blink-and-you’ll-miss it details, is pure *Overwatch*. And it ties into this feeling that this is a game about human characters – even the nonhuman ones – growing and living cheerfully in a world on the brink of collapse (a metaphor that’s distressingly apposite for 2019). *Overwatch’s* latent optimism was easy to miss in the first game – it was just a bunch of cartoon characters shooting each other, after all – but here, as the camera swings to focus on this living world and its intrepid heroes, Blizzard seems ready to reinforce the game’s optimism and make it stand out from the grimdark drudgery of so much else that’s brooding in the big-budget shooter market.

“At a character level, everyone in *Overwatch* has something to bring to the team, and that really resonates with me,” Humphreys says. “Making these compelling, interesting heroes that are all very different from each other and that all have something to say… that’s a very positive message as we’re looking out across the world and thinking about how we can bridge divides.”

In the wake of recent controversies surrounding Blizzard’s harsh reaction to a pro-Hong Kong *Hearthstone* player, and continued gaffes at board level regarding player expression and censorship, it’s refreshing to see that the game’s developers themselves are still grounded and hopeful – committed to the utopian spirit the game is built on. Every member of staff we ask about *Overwatch* 2 is genuinely emotional, with multiple staffers telling us they cried during the game’s reveal at the BlizzCon 2019 opening ceremony. “This is a bright hopeful world, this is a world that need heroes, and this is a world that sees everything for what it could be… and not for what it is right now,” says Humphreys. “I am so excited to work on something that’s telling that story.” ▶

Q & A

JEFFREY KAPLAN

Jeffrey Kaplan started his Blizzard career in 2002 as a quest designer on MMORPG *World Of Warcraft*; nowadays, he's vice president of Blizzard Entertainment, and lead designer on the *Overwatch* series. Here, the public face of the biggest hero shooter on the planet – known as Papa Jeff to his many fans – explains the need for a sequel, ponders what an *Overwatch* endgame might look like, and prepares to reclaim the storytelling torch from the game's playerbase.

What's your definition of a sequel, and how does *Overwatch* 2 fit it?
A sequel is a brand-new game, with new gameplay and features as well as an evolution of the game world. *Overwatch* 2 is clearly a sequel by my definition. We've more than doubled the team size from the original game to make *Overwatch* 2. The game will feature a brand-new core game mode called Push, plus multiple new maps for this mode. We'll be introducing a full suite of new PvP maps to the game – what you would expect from a sequel to any shooter – including multiple new maps for every existing game mode currently in the game, as well as Push.

We're introducing full-featured PvE (not just our simple seasonal content of the past) that will include a complete 'story experience' with a full set of story missions pushing the narrative of *Overwatch* forward through gameplay for the first time. We're also working on a highly replayable cooperative feature we call Hero Missions that will be powered by a progression system that will allow each hero to level up and gain new powers. We will also be introducing multiple new heroes. The engine is getting a lot of great updates as well, and at BlizzCon we showed off the new hero looks and brand-new user interface. *Overwatch* 2 is an order of magnitude larger than the original game, and therefore we consider it a sequel.

How far do you think the definition of a sequel has changed in the game industry in recent times?
The definition – until this point – has not changed. In terms of shooters, you get a new campaign, new multiplayer maps, new progression and unlocks. And that's what a sequel is. All of your progress is reset and people playing the old version of the game are left behind until they purchase the new one. This is exactly what we're hoping to change.

What were your biggest learnings from the first game?
Luckily, all Blizzard games are run as live services. Many of us on the team drew knowledge and inspiration from other games – I worked for six-and-a-half years on *World Of Warcraft*. When it came time to plan our live content, I suggested seasonal events because of the way that they made the world feel in *WOW*. The seasonal events turned out to be one of our most popular pieces of content we added. The biggest lesson for any live service game is always the same: update the game as frequently as you possibly can.

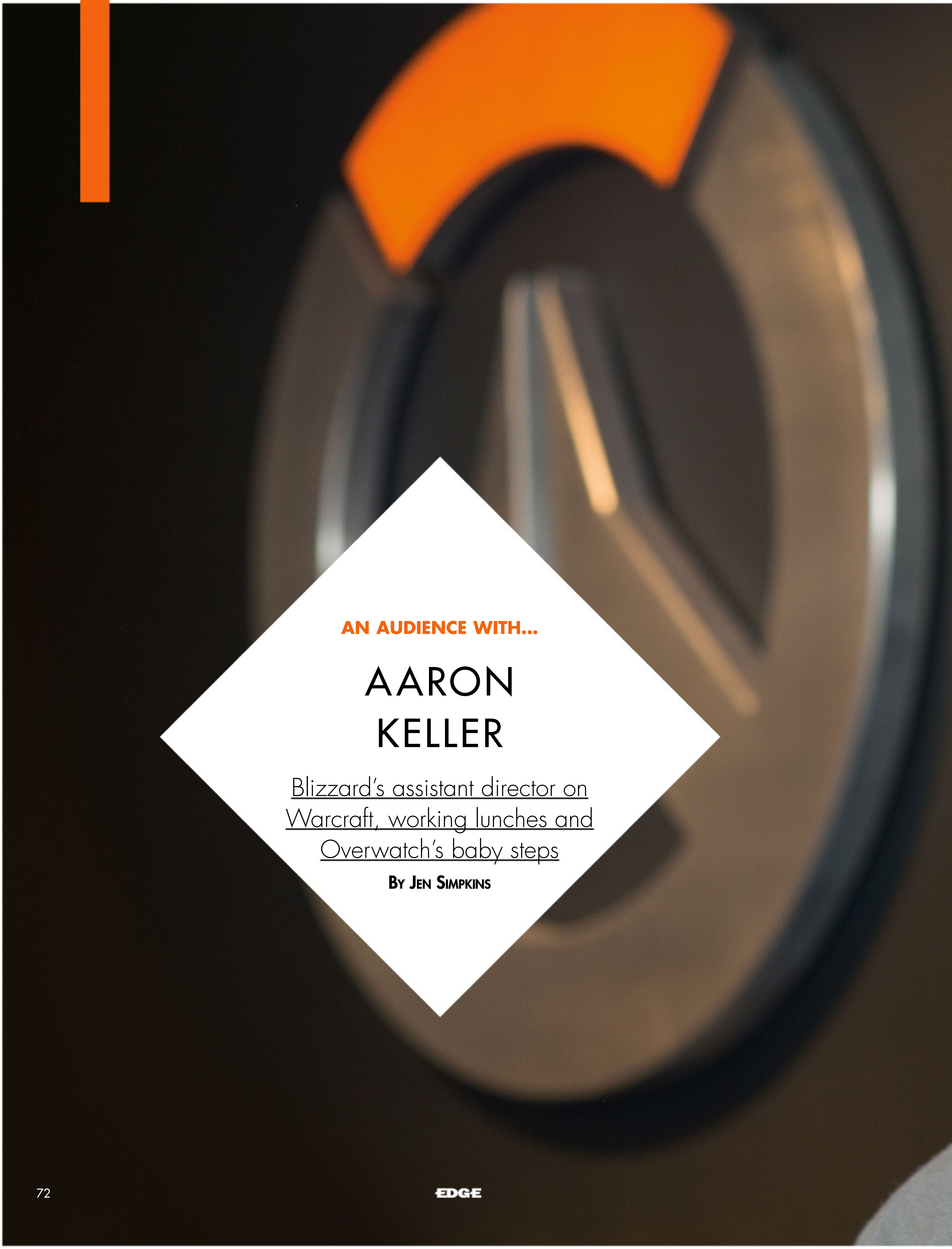
A sequel is an opportunity for developers to make some serious overhauls to their game. Is there anything you're glad to have the chance to rebuild now?
We've already committed to redoing the look of the original game's heroes. We're completely redoing the game's user interface. We are experimenting with more radical changes for PvP internally – but I don't want to commit to any of those yet. Also, as we proved with the Role Queue system, if we feel like something is an overall huge improvement to the current game and does not require significant technical changes (ie the engine visual upgrades) we would consider just changing the current game and not waiting for the sequel.

To what extent would replayable singleplayer endgame content would suit *Overwatch* 2? Is its inclusion something you and the team have considered?
We're definitely going to explore what endgame means for Hero Missions. We have many experienced developers who created endgame content for *World Of Warcraft* and *Diablo* on our team. This is one of the challenges we're very eager to start working on.

Is there any part of you that's nervous about the team taking more of a hand in story missions? Some would argue community-created lore ended up being a standout aspect of the first game.
Absolutely. The community often criticises us for 'lack of story', but I can't help but feel that part of their affinity for our characters exists because of the stories they have imagined for them. Once we – Blizzard – tell you the story, it's going to be hard for that to live up to 'your version' of the character. It's going to be tricky, for sure.

What's the team's vision for *Overwatch*? How has it changed over the years – and how far will this sequel get you towards realising it?
Our vision for *Overwatch* has always been to create inspiring heroes, to embrace inclusivity, to reward teamwork and to inspire our players towards a bright and hopeful future. We've always thought of *Overwatch* as a universe, not just a single game. The original game was the first expression of *Overwatch*, but we dream of what other forms of media could feature *Overwatch*. Movies? An animated series? What other game types would everyone love to see in the *Overwatch* universe? We hope that the characters of *Overwatch* exist far into the future and are expressed in ways that we can't even imagine today. ■

OVERWATCH



AN AUDIENCE WITH…

AARON KELLER

Blizzard's assistant director on Warcraft, working lunches and Overwatch's baby steps

By Jen Simpkins

CV

Aaron Keller joined Blizzard Entertainment in 2001, after ending the '90s working on environments for the *Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver* games at Crystal Dynamics. He began as lead designer on *World Of Warcraft* before serving as lead level designer on its defining expansion, *The Wrath Of The Lich King*. Right before *Lich King* shipped, he moved over to Project Titan in 2008: the huge MMO shooter was very much a halfway house between his work on *WoW* and *Overwatch*. It was, however, shuttered in 2013 – until it was refocused and reformed into *Overwatch*, for which Keller would help maintain the core vision of its characters and its world as assistant director. He's a keen explorer of terrain out in the real world, too – Keller enjoys mountain biking in his free time.

As assistant game director at Blizzard Entertainment, **Aaron Keller** is one of the key developers behind *Overwatch*, the company's wildly successful team-based hero shooter. After 18 years spent working at the studio in Orange County, California, it's clear that his considerable experience helping create MMOs *World Of Warcraft* and (the now cancelled) Project Titan had a hand in making the *Overwatch* universe the sensation it is today. Now, with the announcement of *Overwatch 2*, he's at the forefront of fleshing out a world that has up until now merely served as a shiny backdrop to gun-based battles.

Indeed, it seems everything Blizzard touches turns to gold. Here, with Keller, we try to pin down the specifics of the design ethos strong enough to span multiple projects and genres, and that affords Blizzard's games their consistent hallmark of quality – and discover how *Overwatch 2* will continue the *World Of Warcraft* maker's legacy.

How did you come to work for Blizzard?

I started in September of 2001, right after Blizzard had announced *World Of Warcraft*, on the *World Of Warcraft* team. Initially, I was slated to work on the dungeon team – we were considered 3D artists. So we had a group of about five guys, and we were just assigned to build all the dungeons and the cities in the game. So that was – gosh, that was like, three years before shipping the game, and we worked a tonne of hours. And we worked with all sorts of different departments on the team, from the exterior level designers to all the texture artists. We worked a lot with Bill Petras, who was the art director on *World Of Warcraft*, and he's now the art director on *Overwatch* and he was actually the person that hired me. I always kind of give him a hard time for the questions he asked me in the interview [laughs].

What did he ask you?

He's a huge Conan fan. He just loves Conan The Barbarian. So he asked me a couple of questions about whether I loved Conan. And I'm like, "Oh, yeah, it's great..." I don't think I did very well with those [laughs]. He asked me who my favourite artist was, we talked about architecture a little bit. And I guess I did well on those, because they hired me.

How were you taught how to make a Blizzard game? Does the company have any hard and fast rules when it comes to a design ethos?

When I first started there wasn't really anything like that – maybe because I started as an artist and I worked my way into design, I didn't get to see it. But on *World Of Warcraft*, on all the games we make, first and foremost we're making a game that we want to play. And everyone is passionate about it. So when we started *Overwatch*, Jeff Kaplan, the game director, he had always wanted to make a shooter. He is in love with firstperson shooters, played them throughout his whole life, even at a certain point picked up modding tools and was making maps and stuff for different shooters that were out there. And so it was just something that we always wanted to do, and we wanted to see a very particular take on it.

Over time, Blizzard started to kind of refine what some of our design principles were. And so we came up with key design values – Blizzard has a bunch of values for what Blizzard is, in general, as a company, you know, like 'gameplay first' and 'learn and grow'. There are all these things that are very important to us as a company, but we started codifying some of those on the design side too. Things like: 'control is king'. That was a huge one for us at the start of *Overwatch* – what does it feel like to just hit the buttons and control the character? And there's so much that goes into that, just the responsiveness and the character and the animations that they're playing. Even if you look at some of our other games, like *Hearthstone*... like, most people would probably say 'control is king' doesn't really apply to *Hearthstone* because it's just a card game. But even they took that to heart, in just the act of dragging a card out onto the board and what it feels like. You see what your hand does, you see what that card does, you see how it slams onto the ground. All that is part of making a game feel good.

On Project Titan, and actually even on *Overwatch* because we worked on that from the ground up, there was a lot of fundamental research work we needed to do. So you're looking at a lot of other games, and you're kind of trying to figure out what makes them tick a little bit. And I was doing a lot of work on levels, and so you end up making a tonne of research levels and research maps where you're saying, 'Okay, let's say a space is 12 metres wide – does that feel good to shoot characters in? Let's say it's 80 metres wide; does *that* feel good to shoot characters in? How high should characters be able to jump? How steep of a slope should they be able to run up?' And then you start working on – maybe I'm getting too into the weeds here – this entity called the character controller, the thing that the player is actually using their inputs to move around the world. I think we nailed the *Overwatch* character controller; there's lots of little tricks inside of it that I probably can't really

“EVERYONE ON OUR TEAM IS A ROCK STAR OF THE GAME-DEVELOPMENT WORLD: WE HIRE THE BEST PEOPLE”

Temple Of Anubis was the first *Overwatch* map. It’s also the smallest, Keller says: “We were focused on making combat spaces as tight as possible. We expanded the rest by 10 or 20 per cent”

talk about, about how it handles a lot of different situations and still make it feel really good.

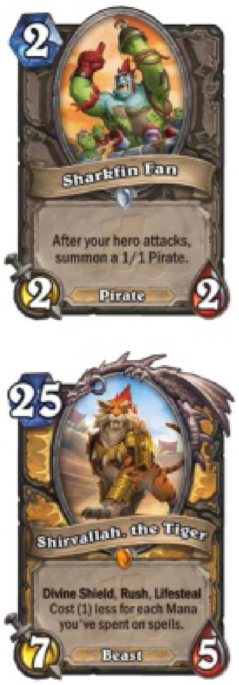
It must have been very different from working on *World Of Warcraft*, where things were already laid out for you. How much did you talk to the creators of other Blizzard games about making the bones of a Blizzard game?
One of the cool things about working at Blizzard is that people typically stay here for a long period of time – it’s kind of like an end destination for people’s careers. And so we have people on our team that have been at the company for almost 25 years, and they’ve moved around to a lot of different projects. They build all these relationships with other people on other teams, or they’ve worked on other teams. And so there’s always a set of people that you can talk to about games. I’ve worked with a lot of different designers here, and a lot of the designers have worked with other designers, and so we do – we have conversations sometimes just over lunch, where we’re talking about the different problems that we’re working on. Other people that you have an incredible amount of respect for can weigh in on what they think they would do in that particular situation. And you might not always do what they say, but it’s always kind of invaluable feedback that we’re getting all around the company.

And it’s not just to help *Overwatch* out, it’s to help all the other projects out too. And you know what? It’s not even to really help them. It’s just because we’re kind of obsessed with making games. We were talking about *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* over the weekend: we just can’t help but play games, and talk about the games that we’re playing or we’re working on, and see how we can make them better. I think that everyone kind of has this core belief that they’re just trying to make the best piece of art that they can. Blizzard has always had this culture of not shipping a game until it’s ready. We call ourselves an iterative design house – we work on something, and then we change the things that we think need to be changed, or we improve the things that we need to improve. And we just keep polishing and iterating on it until we think that it’s great.

So when is a game ready to ship at Blizzard? Do you have a sense of what the standard is before the company’s ready to put it in a box, as it were?
It’s torture, doing that [laughs]. It’s torture shipping, and I think for most of the game team, the game is never ready. We’re such perfectionists, we can always find the things that we want to change. And so it’s really, really hard to say, ‘This is the point where we think it’s good enough’. Because we’re our own worst critics at the company. Everyone on our team is a rock star of the game-development world: we hire the best people, the best developers in the industry. So we have a hard time shipping a product. I wish I could tell you what the magic formula is of us saying when it’s ready, because it’s painful every time to do it.

A lot of times, it’s easiest for us get to a point where we think there’s some magic in the game and you can start to feel it – like, ‘This is good’. But at a certain point, you’re educated enough to where you can pick an end date, and you just have to pick that end date no matter how difficult it is, and then every one of the team is able to focus towards that point. And typically it means for some people, you’re pouring your heart and soul into a certain set of features because in eight months, this thing’s going out the door and we’re going to put Blizzard on the box. In the credits it’s going to say, ‘Designed by Blizzard’. It *has* to be good enough.

When did you know *Overwatch* 2 was going to be a full-fledged sequel?
Early on in the *Overwatch* development cycle, like, in the first few months, we had a pretty solid idea of what the current *Overwatch* game was going to be. And just because we had come off of Project Titan – which was this *massive* game, it was bigger than any game I’d ever worked on or even heard of, there were just so many


2
Sharkfin Fan
After your hero attacks, summon a 1/1 Pirate.
2
Pirate
2
25
Shirvallah, the Tiger
Divine Shield, Rush, Lifesteal
Cost (1) less for each Mana you’ve spent on spells.
7
Beast
5

Blizzard’s ‘control is king’ mantra spans genres, even observed in CCG *Hearthstone*

Trent .07

features in it – we had this philosophy that we wanted to start very, very focused with *Overwatch*. And we called the philosophy 'crawl, walk, run,' and *Overwatch* was going to be our 'crawl'. And then we had another game that we were referring to as our 'walk', and that's kind of what *Overwatch 2* has developed into. It's a game that is more than just players competing against each other. It's a much bigger game with a story with a tonne of content behind it, where players are kind of going through missions with each other against AI. And so we'd always thought of it as a big game. But after *Overwatch* shipped, with the success of it… it's not like it was ever really a separate game, *Overwatch 2*, but we quickly realised that it was going to fulfil everything that *Overwatch* could be.

Overwatch is, at its heart, a fast-paced, team-based shooter; we have now over 50 million people who have played this game. I think one of the amazing things about *Overwatch*, though, is we have a lot of fans that don't even play the game. There are a lot of people out there that say, 'I love Tracer, I love Mercy – but I just can't play such a competitive FPS game. But I love *Overwatch* and I love the universe – can you make something for me to play?' And I think *Overwatch 2* is going to fulfil that for them, where there's this game that people that don't play competitive shooters can jump into and play it the way that Blizzard designs games – they're going to be able to play the co-op side of *Overwatch 2* as their main lifestyle game.

There is so much to that side of the game, from this big story experience that we want to take people through as we see what *Overwatch* as an organisation is going to turn into and how they react to this massive global threat across the world, to this really deep progression system as they as they play through the Hero Missions. Our closest analogy to that right now is what Adventure Mode is to *Diablo III*, that's what these Hero Missions are to us. So it's this massive tail to the game where people can play this for years if they want to. And for us, as we started talking about the game in those terms, it couldn't really be anything *but* a sequel.

How much have you consulted with the *Diablo III* team on those kinds of mechanics?

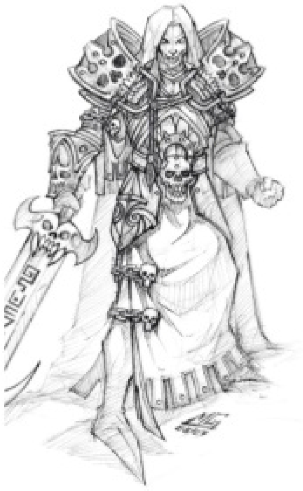
We talk to them all the time, we go to lunch. I'm good friends with a lot of people on the *Diablo IV* team, and a lot of them were on the *Diablo III* team. Another analogy we make is our Hero Missions are similar to world quests in *World Of Warcraft* – one of the lead designers of that system, and one of the lead designers on *World Of Warcraft*, is now on our team spearheading our progression system. So yeah, we have experience from all across the company: we have designers from the *Diablo* team now working on our team, and then we have friends and colleagues that we're in constant communication with, kind of sharing our ideas with and getting feedback from them.

"THE HEROES ARE THINGS THAT EVERYBODY CAN RELATE TO; THERE ARE SO MANY DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES"

What's the biggest thing that you've been able to take from your work on other genres at Blizzard and apply to *Overwatch*?

We had this philosophy on *World Of Warcraft*, that the *world* was the main character. And if you think about that game, especially the original one when it came out, there wasn't really any main protagonist, a good guy or a bad guy. It was all about exploring this world. That really resonated with me, and has stuck with me. Working on *Overwatch*, we started creating this really amazing world. And the thing that stuck out the most in the *Overwatch* universe was the heroes. The heroes are things that everybody I think can relate to; there are so many different personalities, all a little larger than life, that I think that people can look at those and really be inspired. But it's hard for us to really explore the world in that type of game – it's *so* fast-paced that it's difficult to deliver story. We're able to take people to maps all across the world. They're all visually stunning and interesting, but it's hard to go beyond that.

So that's one of the things I'm most excited about with *Overwatch 2*, is we can finally start exploring this world. It's such an important thing for us at Blizzard to create these worlds and let players walk around and explore them. And now we finally get to do that. On *Overwatch 2*, we get to take people through a big story; we get to introduce them to different characters; you get to see what these different characters' relationships with each other are, what their relationships to *Overwatch* and to some of the main protagonists in the story are. I'm really excited to be able to start doing that for our players. ■



The death knight class was introduced in *WoW's Wrath Of The Lich King* expansion

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THE GREAT JOURNEY

How an all-star musical lineup changed videogame soundtracks forever

By Mat Ombler

Most people associate *Halo 2* with the birth of Xbox Live, but *Halo 2* did more than simply change the world of online multiplayer; it changed the world of videogame music too. The *Halo 2* soundtrack is one of the most ambitious and successful videogame soundtracks that has ever been released, spanning two volumes of music that have shipped over 100,000 copies worldwide.

The music in *Halo 2* was written by some of its biggest fans – and we don't just mean the series' co-composers **Martin O'Donnell** and Michael Salvatori. An A-list line-up of some of the world's biggest bands, artists and producers, with a combined total of six Grammys and a billion albums sold between them, all wrote music for the game. The work of **Nile Rodgers**, Steve Vai, John Mayer, Incubus, Breaking Benjamin and Hoobastank was a giant love letter to the *Halo* series and their way of showing the world the impact *Halo: Combat Evolved* had on their own lives.

The first *Halo* had an incredible impact on a lot of people, of course, as well as on Microsoft itself. As a launch title for Xbox, *Halo* was the catalyst for Microsoft shipping millions of consoles and establishing itself, despite much scepticism, as a genuine competitor to console giants Sony and Nintendo. Realising how important the game was and how much it had connected with fans all over the world, Martin O'Donnell, then Bungie's audio director, wanted nothing more than to release the soundtrack. Microsoft, somehow, said no.

"We worked like crazy to finish that score," O'Donnell tells us. "I said, 'We need to release this music as a soundtrack. It's a big deal.' And then the brakes just went on. They [Microsoft] were like, 'Oh, we don't do things like that… we have to look at the market for it'. After we had shipped the game and we were riding the success of it, I just kept coming back to it, saying we should ship the soundtrack!"

A BIG HIT IN THE VIDEOGAME WORLD IS WAY DIFFERENT THAN THIS RIDICULOUS CULTURAL BLOCKBUSTER IT BECAME

While O'Donnell and the Bungie team were passionately fighting for the release of the *Combat Evolved* score, they weren't aware of what was happening behind closed doors. Somebody else was interested in releasing a *Halo* soundtrack: three-time Grammy award winner, record producer and musician Nile Rodgers. Rodgers is responsible for some of the biggest music releases in the world, his career progressing from his time with disco legends Chic to collaborations with artists such as David Bowie, Madonna and Daft Punk. He'd been trying to contact O'Donnell for months.

"I got called into the boardroom with the Microsoft guys and they were like, 'We want to talk about the *Halo* soundtrack, and we want to introduce you to Nile Rodgers'," O'Donnell recalls. He knew better than to turn it down, and a meeting was duly set up. "Nile stood up and was like 'Hey, Marty! I need to meet you!' and I was like 'Hey! I need to you meet you too!'

"And I swear, everyone in the room just started to disappear. At this point we just started talking about music," O'Donnell says. "Nile told me about his experience hearing the music in *Halo* for the first time and how he'd been looking for me. Apparently, there was this wall between me and Nile in terms of Microsoft. But once Nile and me got in a room together, we were like, 'Okay, we can do this'. He was just so passionate about it."

Rodgers was interested in *Halo* because he had just founded Sumthing Else Music Works, a record label specialising in the licensing and distribution of videogame soundtracks. In June 2002, Sumthing Else enjoyed its first release: the *Halo* Original Soundtrack. As most of the music in the game was interactive, O'Donnell and Salvatori reassembled many of the pieces so they could be in a suite or enjoyed as a standalone experience. Fans loved it. With over 40,000 copies sold, its success helped to establish Sumthing Else as the flagship record label for videogame soundtracks, and the label went on to release over 200 other scores from series such as *Gears Of War*, *Uncharted*, *Resident Evil* and *Assassin's Creed*.

Not since the 1995 release of *GoldenEye 007* had a firstperson shooter captured the attention of so many players. Yet, despite the success of *Combat Evolved*, the Bungie team were still coming to terms with the sheer number of people the game had connected with. Actors from Star Wars and stars such as Justin Timberlake visited Bungie for studio tours, during which they would share their memories of the game and tell the team how much they loved *Halo*. "We all thought *Halo* was gonna be a big hit, but a big hit in the videogame world is way different than this ridiculous cultural blockbuster it became," O'Donnell says. "None of us anticipated that."

A sequel to *Halo* was never initially planned, but it was inevitable that fans would soon be expecting one. The Bungie team set to work on developing concepts and bouncing ideas backwards and forwards, but without a concept to work from as source material, O'Donnell hadn't settled on a musical direction for the game and was pretty open to ideas. That blank slate was manna from heaven for Rodgers, who was keen to utilise his network of contacts and get some of these big-name *Halo* fans to write music for the new game.

O'Donnell laughs when he recalls the calibre of the names that Rodgers was reeling off. Some of the initial names that were suggested included the legendary rock guitarists Jeff Beck and Steve Vai, but he even suggested the pop star Pink. "Nile came and said, 'Look: there's all these guys who are just really loving *Halo*, and for *Halo 2* I can get you ▶

2
original soundtrack
and new music
volume one

Martin O'Donnell's latest project is Highwire Games' PSVR adventure *Golem* anybody you want. I can get you all sorts of people.' It was so mind-blowing to me," O'Donnell says.

O'Donnell considered some of the ways he could use the artists that Rodgers was suggesting, and decided that someone like Jeff Beck or Steve Vai "would be spectacular." And with that, Rodgers set off on an epic quest to get one of the biggest guitar legends in the world to write music for a videogame soundtrack. It just so happened that three-time Grammy Award winner Vai, who has recorded and performed with acts such as Whitesnake and Ozzy Osbourne, was on tour with G3, the long-running series of virtuoso guitar shows established in 1995 by Vai's former mentor, Joe Satriani. As luck would have it, one of those dates was close to the Bungie studio.

"Nile called me and said Steve Vai was coming to town," O'Donnell says. "He said, 'Book a studio, I'm gonna fly out there and Steve Vai's going to lay down some tracks.' I couldn't believe it!"

O'Donnell didn't realise it at the time, but the studio session that he had just booked would make videogame history. Steve Vai shredding over the top of the *Halo 2* soundtrack, Nile Rodgers directing him by energetically mouthing a cappella guitar renditions of the *Halo* theme, and Marty O'Donnell supervising the session in awe, is a sight to behold. Over 500,000 people have watched that studio session (courtesy of a video that O'Donnell uploaded to his YouTube channel) to witness the creation of what became the *Halo* Mjolnir Mix, an epic guitar reworking of *Halo*'s choral main theme and arguably the most iconic track from the series.

> ADDING GUITAR TO A PIECE BUILT AROUND VOCALS, VIOLINS AND CELLOS COULD HAVE BEEN RISKY BUT IT WORKED

It's clear from the video that everyone in that room was having the time of their lives. Rodgers has rubbed shoulders with some of the biggest stars that have ever graced this planet, but describes working on the *Halo 2* soundtrack as one of his fondest memories. "I have become very, very close to the *Halo* team," he says. "It's hard to express my deep love and admiration for Marty and the entire music team [at Bungie].

"The really great moment was when I went out to Seattle and I was working with Marty on the Mjolnir Mix. Steve Vai, Joe Satriani and Yngwie Malmsteen happened to be doing one of those G3 gigs.

"I called Steve up and said, 'look, I'm working on this project and I want you to come over and read the first violin part and some other stuff and we'll feel it out together and see what happens.' Marty was so open to the concept. Steve came over, soundchecked, and we just ended up having such a great time."

One of the most remarkable things about that studio session is that many of the guitar parts that made it into the final cut of the Mlojnir Mix were some of Vai's very first takes. Once the studio session had finished, O'Donnell set to work on picking out the best bits from the session and sending it over to Salvatori in Chicago.

"I remember playing it to the guys at Bungie after it was all done. They loved it but I was like: 'Is this gonna work for *Halo*?' It was a new approach. But it was such a cool track, so we were like, 'Well, we've gotta figure out a place to use it!' And you know, the fans really loved it."

When you listen to the original *Halo* theme, it's difficult to find much to improve on. It's rare that a piece of game music manages to resonate with so many people on the same level as Koji Kondo's music from *The Legend Of Zelda* or Nobuo Uematsu's work in the *Final Fantasy* series. Adding guitar to a piece that's predominantly built around vocals, violins and cellos could have been a risky endeavour but it worked so well that it ended up shifting the sound of the *Halo 2* soundtrack.

"When it comes to any of the guitar-based, hard-driving stuff, the Mjolnir Mix was the first of that. And once we saw that that could work, it shifted the direction of some of the other pieces," O'Donnell says. "I think by the time of the studio session we had already done the announcement trailer for *Halo 2*, which was back to the epic orchestra thing, and we decided to just keep combining those two approaches, blending them together."

There was more guitar to come for *Halo 2*, even after Vai had recorded his session. Incubus, who were at the peak of their success having celebrated their first platinum release in 2000, wrote a suite of music for the *Halo 2* soundtrack, comprising four prog-rock songs that were known as The Odyssey. While three of the tracks only appeared on the *Halo 2* soundtrack, the fourth, Follow, is played in the Arbiter mission where you chase the Heretic Leader in a Banshee. O'Donnell admits that trying to place Incubus' track in the game was "a bit of a puzzle. Could I take this music and make it adaptable so it fits into a level and accompanies gameplay?

"I got a few guys within the studio who pushed back and they were like, 'Marty, this doesn't sound like *Halo*. There's too much guitar.' They used the British term 'guitar wankery'. So, I was like, 'Well, OK, maybe, but it's fun, a little bit risky and it's a different colour for *Halo 2*'. So I ignored those people! I just went ahead and did it the way I thought was cool."

He carried on. Hoobastank, who have sold ten million albums worldwide, and Breaking Benjamin, who have three platinum records, also wrote music for the game. Hoobastank wrote a nu-rock track called Connected that featured as the second track on volume 1 of the *Halo 2* soundtrack. It was recorded in a rather unconventional way: Rodgers immediately fell for the acoustics in the venue's bathroom.

Green Day, one of the biggest bands of the era, also contributed music to *Halo 2*, but it was deemed a step too ▶

HIGH CHARITY

Many people aren't aware that American singer-songwriter and guitarist John Mayer features on the *Halo 2* soundtrack. His inclusion in the game was initially kept secret due to potential issues with his label and management. After visiting the studio and hitting it off with O'Donnell, Mayer ended up contributing some incredibly tasty guitar licks that featured on the Epilogue track in *Halo 2*, which plays over the end credits. "It turned out John was a huge *Halo* fan and wanted to contribute music to the game," O'Donnell says. "I even sent him a bunch of different tracks and I just said whatever you wanna do, do it and just send them back to me and he did. That's how it got in there." Due to the potential label and management issues involved with Mayer creating music for a commercial product, all Mayer wanted was a special thanks to his gamertag in the end credits. As a huge *Halo* fan, Mayer knew that he would inevitably end up playing through the game with his friends, and when the credits rolled he'd be able to surprise them by showing them he'd contributed to the game.

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far for a *Halo* game – even one whose music had already wandered so far off brief. Rodgers and the team wanted to feature music that conveyed what *Halo* was about, rather than choosing big bands just to help shift copies of the soundtrack.

"Green Day had just come out with American Idiot, which was a brilliant, brilliant album, and they had written a whole piece for *Halo 2*," Rodgers says. "It made me feel bad because they had put so much into it but for some reason, Breaking Benjamin just seemed to really nail it with what they had come up with. It nailed the spirit of *Halo 2 volume 1*. It was just so right.

"I was happy that the *Halo* team said we need to go with what feels right artistically rather than just going with them because they were big stars. And it wasn't because what they did wasn't good – what they did was terrific – it just wasn't the right fit."

O'Donnell and Salvatori wanted *Halo* players to experience the music and sounds of *Halo* as they intended, despite how frustrating that might be for some of its players. On the first five *Halo* titles, there is no option to adjust any of the in-game audio settings – in direct contravention of Microsoft's certification rules. Thankfully, *Halo*'s success afforded O'Donnell a little more leeway.

HEARING THE MJOLNIR MIX IS ENOUGH TO TRANSPORT MANY PLAYERS BACK TO THEIR FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES OF XBOX LIVE

Benjamin Burley, founder and frontman of Breaking Benjamin, has been playing videogames for as long as he can remember, ever since he first experienced the pixelated joys of a Commodore 64. Although Burley tells us he spends most of his time playing VR games now, some of his favourite videogame franchises are *Halo*, *Elder Scrolls* and *Call Of Duty*. For Burley, working on one of his favourite videogames was a dream come true.

"I got a call from my label and they said Nile Rodgers wanted to contact me," he says. "I talked to him and he let me know what they were looking for so I did my best to facilitate that. I intentionally wrote that song just for *Halo 2* and they really liked it."

Breaking Benjamin's track Blow Me Away has become synonymous with blowing the Covenant army into tiny pieces as you tear through room after room in the game's Gravemind level. One YouTube upload of the song currently stands at almost 30 million views. The success of the song even resulted in the band re-releasing it as a single years later.

"At the time, it was really cool to see a song that wasn't really ever a single for us, we didn't put it on an album so we could promote it at the time, but it took its own leg and people just kinda made it into a single," Burley says. "I think that's really awesome. We can play the song today at a Breaking Benjamin concert and people will sing along to it and really enjoy it."

Rodgers wanted all the bands that featured in the game to have a genuine passion for, and understanding of, *Halo*. He wanted them to be inspired enough to write music that would connect with *Halo* fans all over the world and believes one of the reasons the *Halo 2* soundtrack was so successful is that their songs were a musical reimagining of their own *Halo* experience.

"By having other composers become part of the experience you also now have the vision of people who loved *Halo: Combat Evolved* and you got to have their interpretation of what the action should feel like," Rodgers says. "That was pretty exciting. So you had not only O'Donnell and Salvatori, but now people who were massive fans; people who were playing *Halo* for hours and hours and hours on tour buses."

It's hard to shake the music of *Halo 2*. The music that we hear during our most formative years – usually anywhere from the age of ten to our early twenties – can stick with us for the rest of our lives. As *Halo 2* celebrates its 15th birthday, hearing the Mjolnir mix is enough to transport many players back to their formative experiences of Xbox Live. Others will recall the countless sleepless nights playing through the campaign in co-op mode with their best friend sitting beside them. Rodgers believes that no other game has managed to top the *Halo 2* experience and that, together, he, Vai, O'Donnell and Salvatori were the dream team.

"I would have to say that was my shining moment," Rodgers says. "That was my We Are Family or Le Freak moment in videogames. Everything just happened to come together. Everyone was all on the same plane. I've never achieved that kind of success, or that kind of clarity, since."

The *Halo 2* soundtrack bring back plenty of other memories for Rodgers too. One of his favourites is the story that Vai told him about a father-son bonding experience during the midnight launch of *Halo 2*. Vai had gone to pick up the game with his son, a huge *Halo* fan, and described the experience to Rodgers as being the moment when his son finally thought his dad could pass as being cool.

O'Donnell still struggles to come to terms with the impact the game and its music has had on its players. He recalls an occasion when he was approached by a fan who shared a story about how much the music in the game had impacted the lives of him and his best friend.

"He had tears in his eyes," O'Donnell says. "And I'm like, 'What's going on?' He said, 'My friend died of cancer and one of your pieces was played at his funeral. That's what he wanted.' And I was like, wow. To realise that the game can have meaning and importance way beyond anything we intended, it's a real honour. It's almost too much for me to think about. To me, it's great to have a career in something where you can make something that has that kind of impact." ■

MAKING PROGRESS

In music composition, a movement is a piece that can be performed on its own but is part of a larger composition. The movements in a piece vary in length, tempo, time signature and structure, taking the listener on a journey. The four movements Incubus wrote for the *Halo 2* soundtrack are a fitting tribute to The Great Journey, *Halo 2*'s last story chapter. They total 27 minutes, and are some of the most experimental pieces of music that the band has ever created. Many Incubus fans may be surprised to learn that *Halo* is responsible for the release of what is essentially a secret Incubus prog rock EP. While O'Donnell was working on finalising *Halo 2*'s tracks for an album release, Rodgers was adamant that a soundtrack needed to be ready to coincide with the game's release. "*Halo 2* Volume 1 was done because I just wasn't ready with all of the music! That's why Incubus has the four-part prog rock thing on there," O'Donnell admits. Spanning the *Halo 2* soundtrack across two volumes gave him the time he needed to finish mixing the remaining parts of the score.

THE MAKING OF...

SAYONARA WILD HEARTS

Finger snaps, fan art and fragments left behind – the story behind Simogo's pop heartbreaker

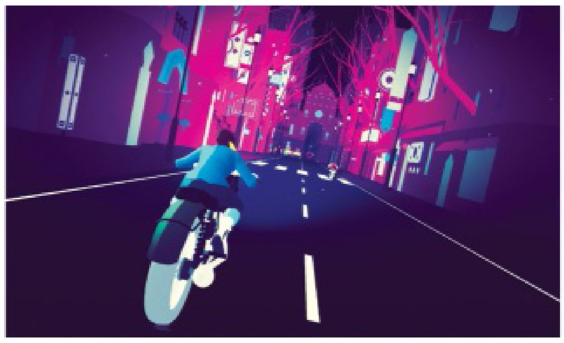
By Chris Schilling

Format iOS, PS4, Switch
Developer Simogo
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Origin Sweden
Release 2019

Parallel Universes is the 13th, and one of the most conceptually ingenious, of *Sayonara Wild Hearts*' 23 tracks. Here, the player character rides a motorbike down a course flanked by a pair of masked twins: the Stereo Lovers. With each snap of their fingers – on Switch, this is accompanied by a small but perceptible buzz of HD Rumble you can feel in your palms – the course shifts between two realities. *Click*. You steer left to gather a trail of score-boosting hearts. *Click*. You swerve right to avoid a wall that suddenly appears in front of you. Though from start to finish it lasts no more than 90 seconds, it's so beautifully executed and thematically fitting you'd never believe it was an 11th-hour inclusion – so when Simogo's **Simon Flesser** admits it was put together in a little more than a week, and squeezed in just before the game was sent to QA, we're quite taken aback. Really? "Yeah," he says. "We were working on a *WarioWare*-style megamix mode, which was functional and up-and-running, but opted for giving the Lovers one more stage instead." Appealing as that mode might sound, it's hard not to think Simogo made the right choice.

Yet if there were mere days between conception and completion of the last tune to make the tracklist, it had taken years for development to reach full speed; in contrast, "months and months" of effort went into the first finished stage, Begin Again. By which time, *Sayonara Wild Hearts* had already undergone a major shift in direction. Inspired by The World Ender, a song by indie-folk band Lord Huron, Flesser first imagined a game about "an avenger that comes back from the dead". Then, taking cues from the teddy girl and café racer subcultures, he drew a picture of a masked woman as the lead, which became the focal point of early development. At first, the game was much darker in tone, with the music blending surf rock and Ethiopian influences. Until one day – as discussed in the Post Script to the review in **E**338 – Flesser was hit by an epiphany while listening to Chvrches, and decided that pop music was the way forward.

To compose the game's centrepiece pop songs, Flesser called upon regular collaborator Jonathan Eng, the man largely responsible for the soundtrack of *The Sailor's Dream* as well as songs for *Year Walk* and *Device 6*. Begin Again, a song about deciding to leave a relationship behind and start afresh, was the first he sent over, having been given very little direction. From there, Flesser began to provide more detailed outlines: "I'd have requests, but they were more about tempo and such," he says. "For a few songs I provided some keywords or phrases that Jonathan could play around with." When Eng returned, Flesser would offer some ideas or lyric feedback until each song was completed.



Simogo has some alternatives for those who would refer to *Sayonara Wild Hearts* as an endless runner: Flesser prefers 'on-rails action ballet' or 'pop pantomime arcade game'

"THE INSTRUMENTAL STAGES WERE EASIER, BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T HAVE TO BE SO RIGID TO THE FORMULAS OF A POP SONG"

Another friend of Simogo, Daniel Olsén, provided the arrangements to make Eng's words and melodies sing; Flesser shares two of Eng's early submissions (these appear on Fading Memories, a cassette compilation of demos and unused tracks recently released by publisher Annapurna Interactive) and they sound remarkably different to the finished versions. Olsén was also responsible for the instrumental tracks between the main songs that turned what was originally planned as an EP into an LP – including a remix of Debussy's Clair de Lune, transforming what has recently become something of a videogame staple into something delightfully new. For these, Flesser says there was a little more back and forth between himself and Olsén – although not because they were more difficult to get right. "There was just more wiggle room for Daniel and I to play around with ideas. In fact, I'd say the instrumental stages were easier, because they didn't have to be so rigid to the formulas of a pop song." Meanwhile, the final piece of the aural puzzle fell into place with the arrival of vocalist Linnea Olsson, around ten months into development. By which stage, Begin Again had been fully composed, although the stage it would soundtrack was still incomplete.

"I always knew we had something with the music," Flesser says, yet it wasn't until Begin Again was fully finished that Simogo knew for sure it was on the right track: "It was quite an easy thing to just hand to people and they'd immediately get the idea." But eight months later this was one of only two finished stages – and the other would eventually be scrapped. Having grown accustomed to setting itself limitations for its previous games, the studio found its latest project beginning to drift alarmingly. Was it a case of too many ideas? Overscoping? "It wasn't just one thing," he says. "We usually work within a box of rules, be that platform or scope, and we didn't do that for a long time with this one." Flesser goes so far as to suggest it's possible the game would never have been finished without a little more accountability – which Annapurna's involvement duly provided.

At that point, he says, Simogo was still in denial about how long it was going to take to finish the game, though with a publisher now on board, the studio began taking steps to get stages done quicker. Yet it did so without cutting back too many of its ideas; the finished game proves it simply packed them in tighter. Still, a few were abandoned – more owing to concerns about overcomplicating the player experience (this is the rare game you can play with one hand, even on console) than giving itself too much work. Interstitial sections with free movement were cast aside to sustain a stronger pacing, while aiming mechanics were simplified to avoid the need for any kind of tutorial. Other stages stayed, but ended up quite different from their original form, the oddly soothing twilight drive of Night Drift being the prime example. "It had quite a different ruleset – something much more like *Out Run* with a Time Extend – but that kind of thing made it feel like we were creating a game collection instead of a game." ▶

After a quick tangential aside, in which Flesser wishes for a parallel universe where *Out Run 2* was on Switch ("Literally no one cares about the licence! Oh well") he notes that he wanted *Sayonara Wild Hearts* to feel like the kind of game Sega doesn't make any more – "or anyone else, for that matter". If you've played the game, you'll detect the influence of *Space Harrier* and *Rez*, with hints of *After Burner* and even *Jet Set Radio*. As such, he's slightly put out whenever anyone likens the game to endless runners instead: "I don't have anything against them, but *Sayonara Wild Hearts* is only a runner if you're completely unaware of games before 2000."

It's not endless either, although it can feel that way if you're trying to earn a gold ranking on the Album Arcade mode that unlocks after you finish the game. While on your initial playthrough each track is accessed separately from the menu, here the 23 tracks run consecutively, with only brisk cutscene breaks interrupting an almost seamless 50-something minutes of play. Given that *Sayonara Wild Hearts* was conceived as a 'pop album videogame', did Simogo think about having it the other way round? "Tons and tons," Flesser says. "Up until the very end. But the album mode was actually added very late. We didn't want to add the mode before we could get down loading times until they felt invisible. Ultimately, we felt the freedom of being able to replay and understand the game properly before being tossed into a one-hour session felt more fair." We venture that this also allows the player to instantly replay a favourite track – much as they might do with a song they've heard for the first time – and Flesser agrees. "Also, as unfashionable as it is, it is very much a game that is built around 'rehearsal' and learning the stages, which feels better suited to dividing it up."

Though it's a less story-focused game than much of the studio's recent output, *Sayonara Wild Hearts*' tale of a young woman recovering from a broken heart seems to have resonated strongly with players. So did Simogo collectively or individually draw upon personal experiences of heartbreak, or was it aiming to capture something more universal? The tarot theme, we note, seems to lend itself well to several interpretations, though Flesser suggests the music played a more important role. "Heartbreak and pop music go hand in hand with each other," he says. "The thing about that kind of pop music is that it is quite broad in terms of emotions. It's not specific."

In other words, we shouldn't expect a definitive answer to our question. "I want it to be up for interpretation, like a song. If I talk too much about what it means to me, it will lose its meaning to an audience. And I don't want it to."

Happily, he *is* prepared to talk about the song that arguably marks the game's emotional high point. With its lyrics about treasuring "fragments left behind" and keening backing vocals, The World We Knew sounds like someone grieving over a relationship's end just as they come to terms with it being over. Conceived as a direct

Q&A

Simon Flesser
Co-founder, Simogo

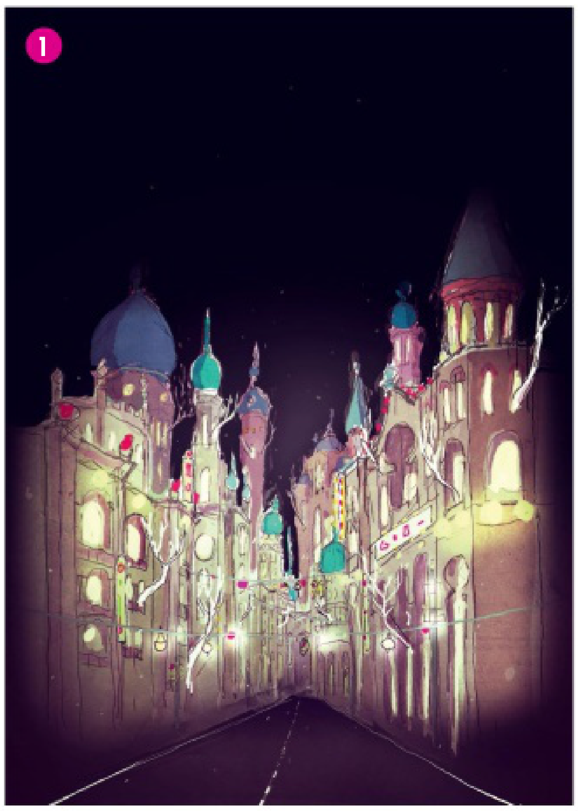
We imagine you're glad you managed to squeeze in Parallel Universes. We've seen plenty of people mention that particular stage as a highlight.
Yeah, I'm surprised by that to be honest! I didn't think it was particularly clever when I designed the stage, I was just rushing to get a unique idea out the door as fast as possible. Or rather, I wanted to squeeze in something that was a little more conceptual, as The Stereo Lovers stages were more 'standard' stages.

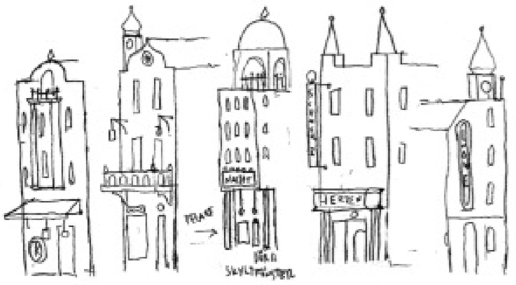
When we spoke to you in E328, you said you wanted to make "the most videogame-y videogame", and that seems to be reflected in the location names: Woe Woe Woods, Twilight Cry Sky. Those are Mario references, right?
[Laughs] Yes, we were very much aiming for 'Sad *Mario Kart*'.

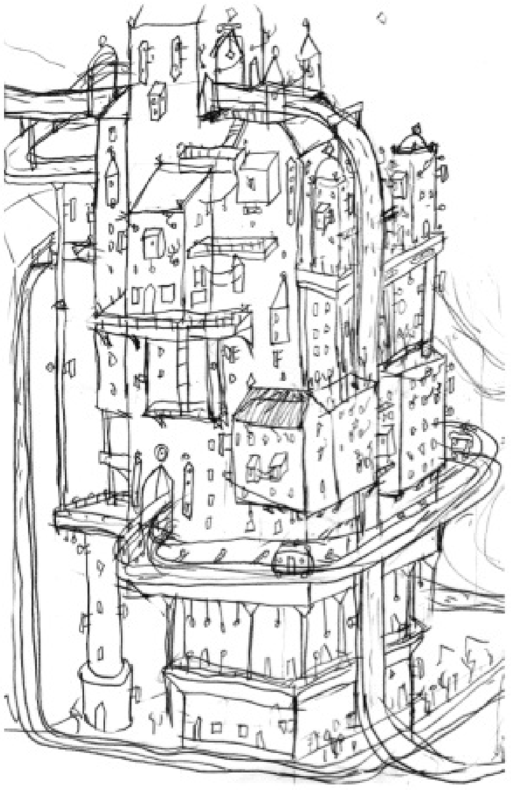
We like the idea of a *WarioWare* Megamix mode, but you're not a studio that likes post-release content or patches, are you?
We're not opposed to it, really, and we did have a list of ideas – Karaoke mode, Megamix mode – but ultimately I think our energies are better used on moving forwards.

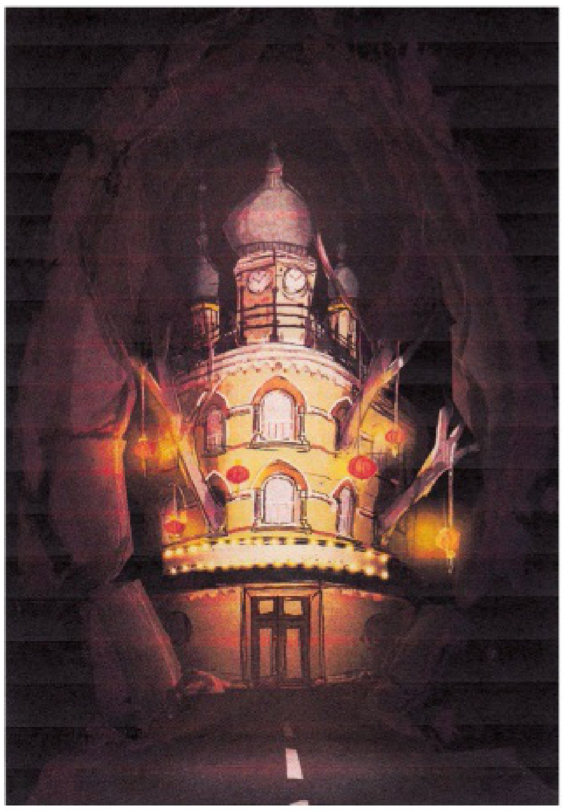
You used the word 'unfashionable', which almost feels like a mission statement for Simogo. It feels like you're always wilfully off-trend – in this case, as you said, trying to make the kind of game that no one is making any more.
Yeah, I like to imagine that we are sort of on the outside looking in.

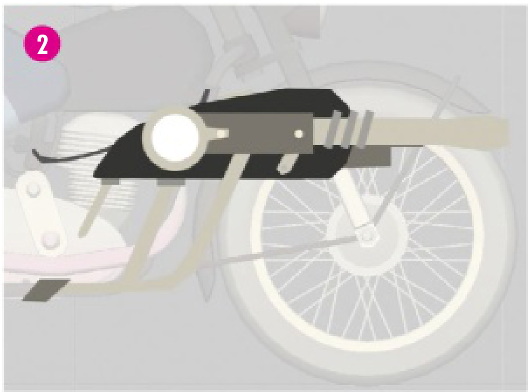
And is that somewhere you're happy to be?
Yeah, I think that's generally the perspective I have. It's nice to be part of things, but having that outside perspective is good because it makes you less dependent, I suppose.

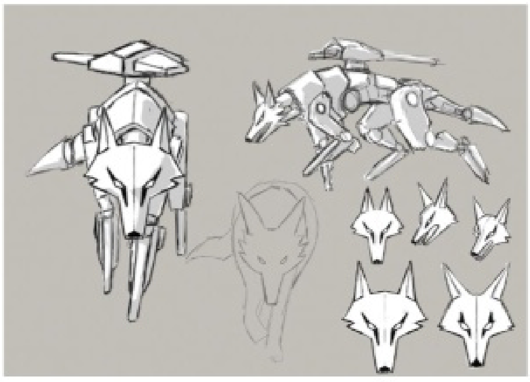


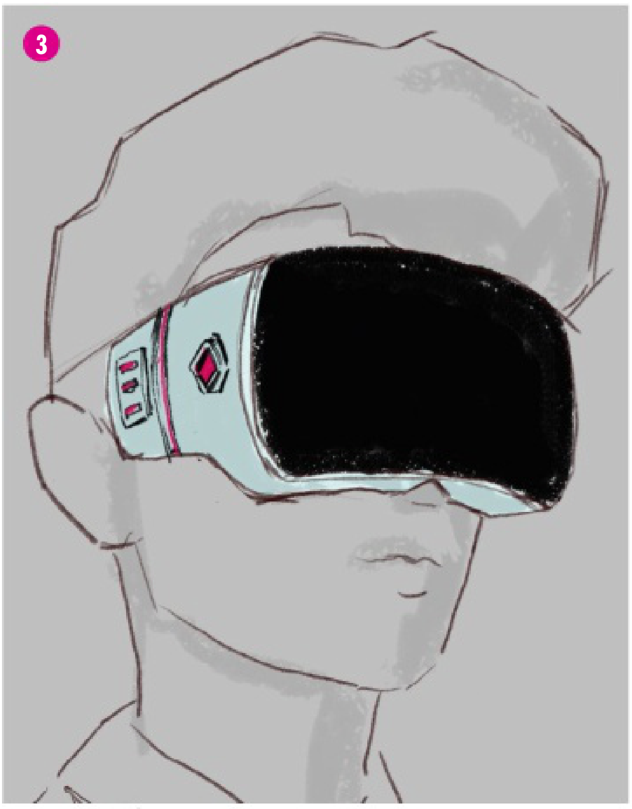




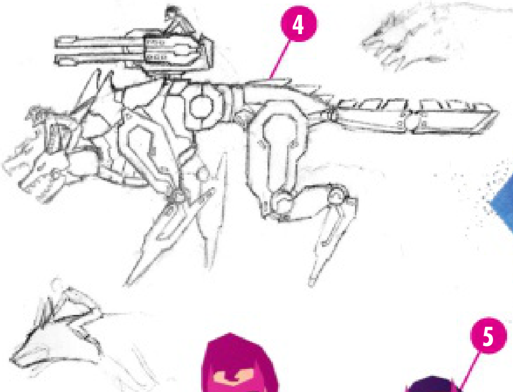


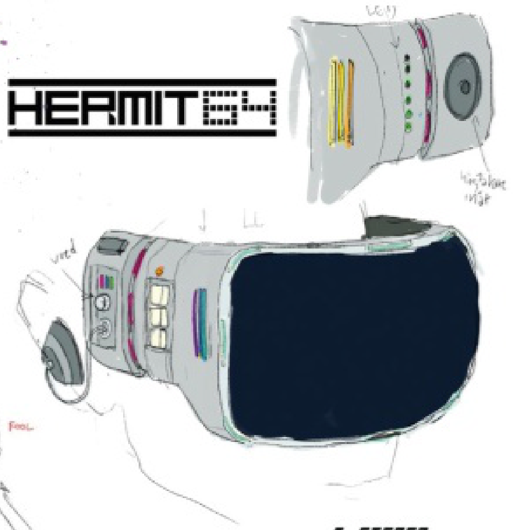


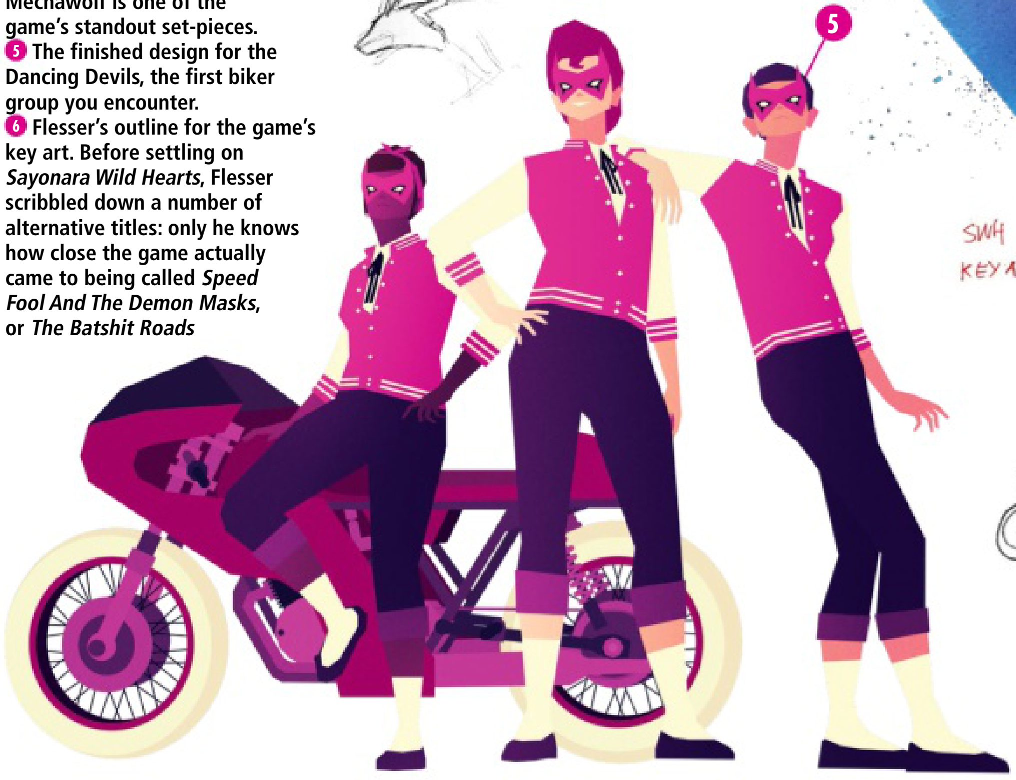


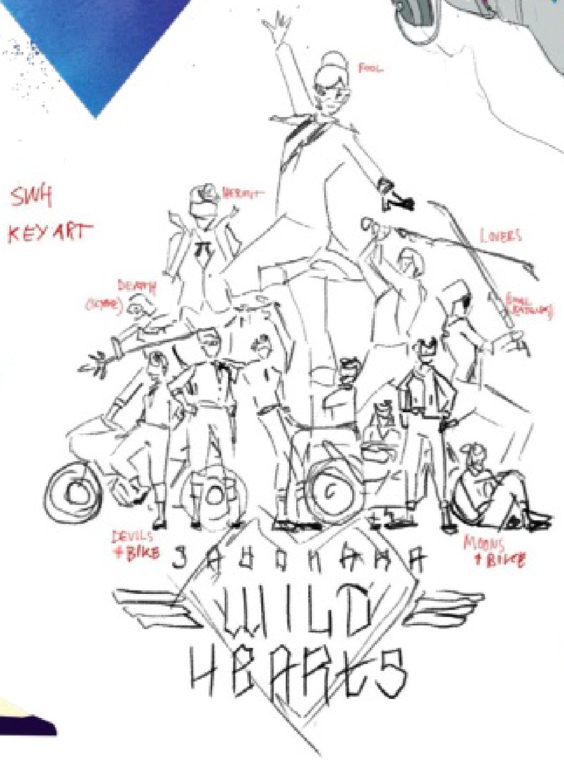


① Background art for Hatehell Valley, the region in which you fight the Dancing Devils gang.
② The Fool shoots wolves and gems with her bike's laser cannon. Simogo toyed with the idea of gyro aiming in an early prototype but quickly decided against it.
③ A concept sketch for Hermit 64's virtual-reality mask.
④ The battle against the Howling Moons' Cerberus-inspired Mechawolf is one of the game's standout set-pieces.
⑤ The finished design for the Dancing Devils, the first biker group you encounter.
⑥ Flesser's outline for the game's key art. Before settling on *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, Flesser scribbled down a number of alternative titles: only he knows how close the game actually came to being called *Speed Fool And The Demon Masks*, or *The Batshit Roads*





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DEATH (SCYTHE)
DEVILS + BIKE
MOONS + BIKE
SAYONARA
WILD
HEARTS
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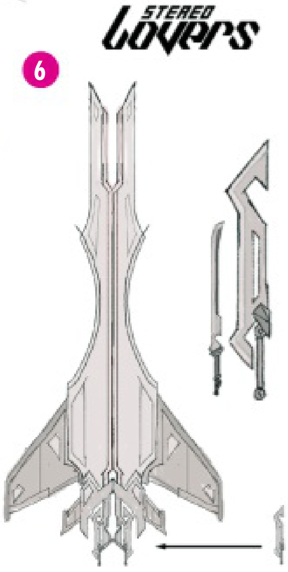
STEREO
LOVERS

response to Begin Again, the song's lyrics didn't change, though its overall tone – and the design of the level – was originally very different. "It was going to be a doo-wop song performed by a robot," Flesser says, surprising us for the second time. "I had this vague scenario in mind, where the Hermit would call upon a jukebox robot that would perform this song while attacking, as you chased roller skaters around a circular rink."

It sounds like a fun idea to us, though Flesser says it was nixed because he felt the doo-wop vibe was too jokey – the game has moments of humour, but this felt a little too knowing. Either way, it's clear the song was always set to be quite a departure from the rest; Flesser says he wanted it to be the equivalent of *Ouendan*'s Over The Distance or *Gitaroo Man*'s Legendary Theme (specifically, the acoustic version). "It's a little trick I like to do," he says. "A finger snap at the audience – 'Hey, you aren't sleeping are you?' – and then you go back to standard procedures again. Once a player thinks they've got the structure figured out, you come in with a twist."

That audience has certainly been paying attention. Though Flesser doesn't have any download figures to share, it's clear the game has reached a wide player base through Apple Arcade alone – even if Simogo may have had understandable misgivings about what amounted to a stealth launch three days early through Apple's beta programme. Judging by the sheer volume of fan art (of which a pleasantly surprised Flesser remarks, "It has plenty of characters and ticks off some pop-culture boxes that makes it inspiring for people to draw, I think,") it's attracted a devoted cult following. And so that partly fatalistic title – the 'sayonara' alluded to Flesser's fear that this could well be Simogo's final bow – seems to have been wide of the mark.

All the same, a post-launch tweet suggested this might still be farewell – for the time being, at any rate. "Things will likely be a little quiet from Simogo for a while now," Flesser wrote. "But we're sure we'll see you again, someday, somewhere." So, is this au revoir, or a more permanent adieu? "We've got to keep you on your toes a little," he says. "It's definitely some kind of goodbye. It's all a little unclear at the moment. But yeah – new adventures ahead." Whatever those adventures might be, it's probably wise to expect the unexpected; another change of direction, another snap of the fingers. *Click*. And the horizon changes again. ■

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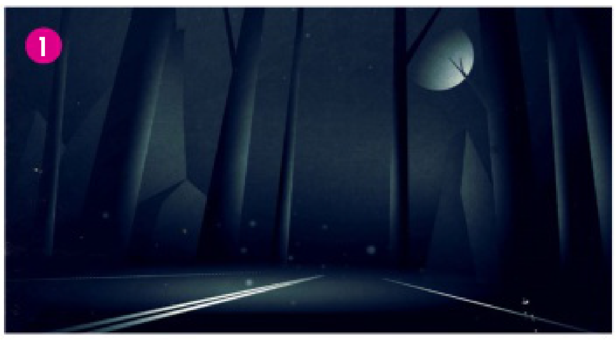

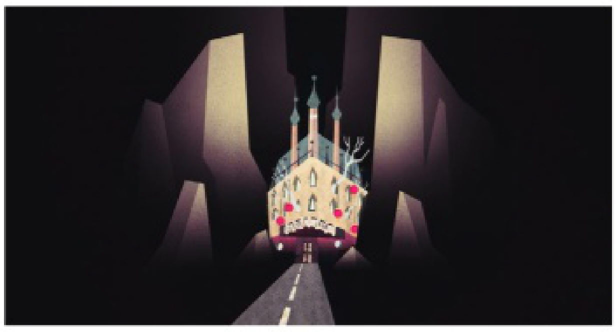

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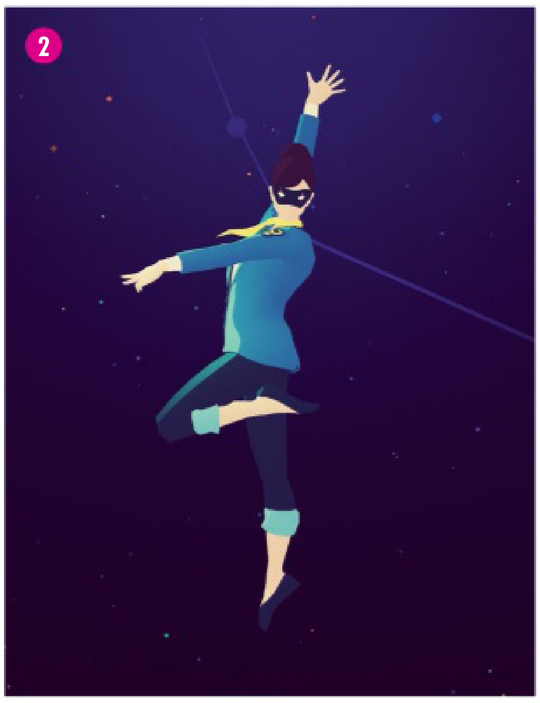
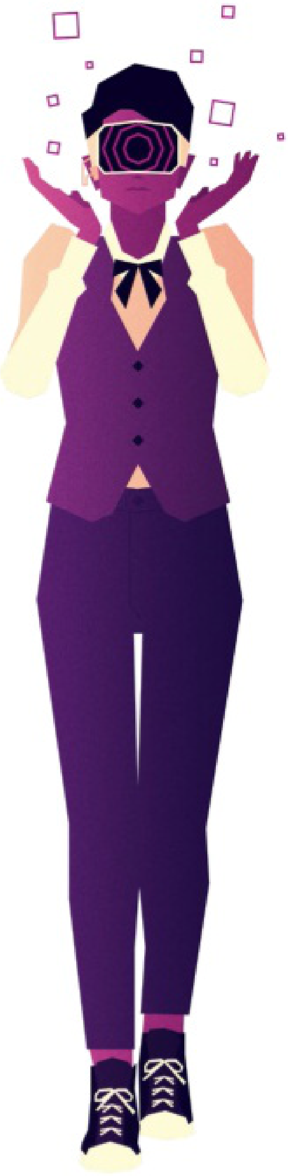
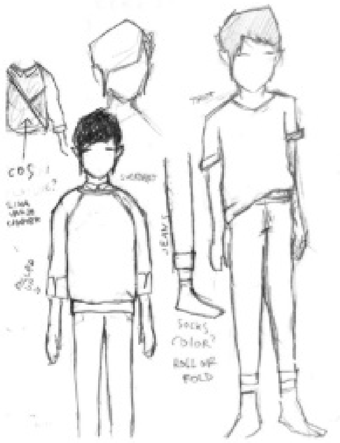




① **Flesser's earliest concept piece is reminiscent of *Year Walk*.**
② **Masks allowed Simogo to create expressive characters while saving on facial animation.**
③ **The game was originally going to be based around this Pyramid Of Fate. Flesser: "Inside it there would be a table of cards which would transport you into levels."**
④ **A design for the reversible cover of the limited physical release.**
⑤ **Originally there were five stages, with more elaborate introductions; Mine began with the Fool riding over a bridge to a castle. Flesser: "In the level, the Fool cloned herself and you'd control two of her, with the camera panning back and forth. […] It just felt like a worse version of Begin Again, so we scrapped it."**
⑥ **Flesser's illustration of a woman smoking is where it all began.**
⑦ **"The stages weren't really made in a linear way," Flesser tells us, "though you can deduce which were made later on in the project: they're usually a little more systems-driven"**



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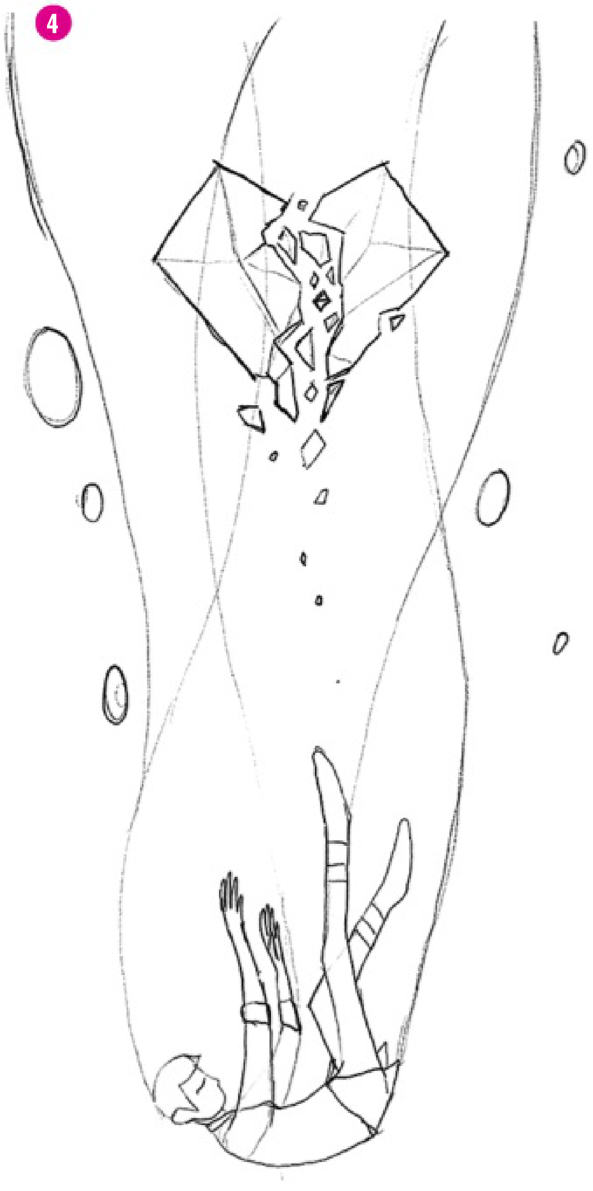

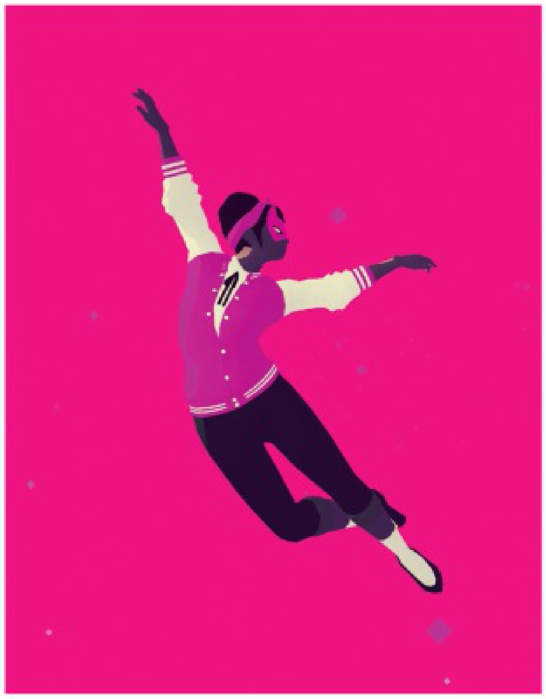

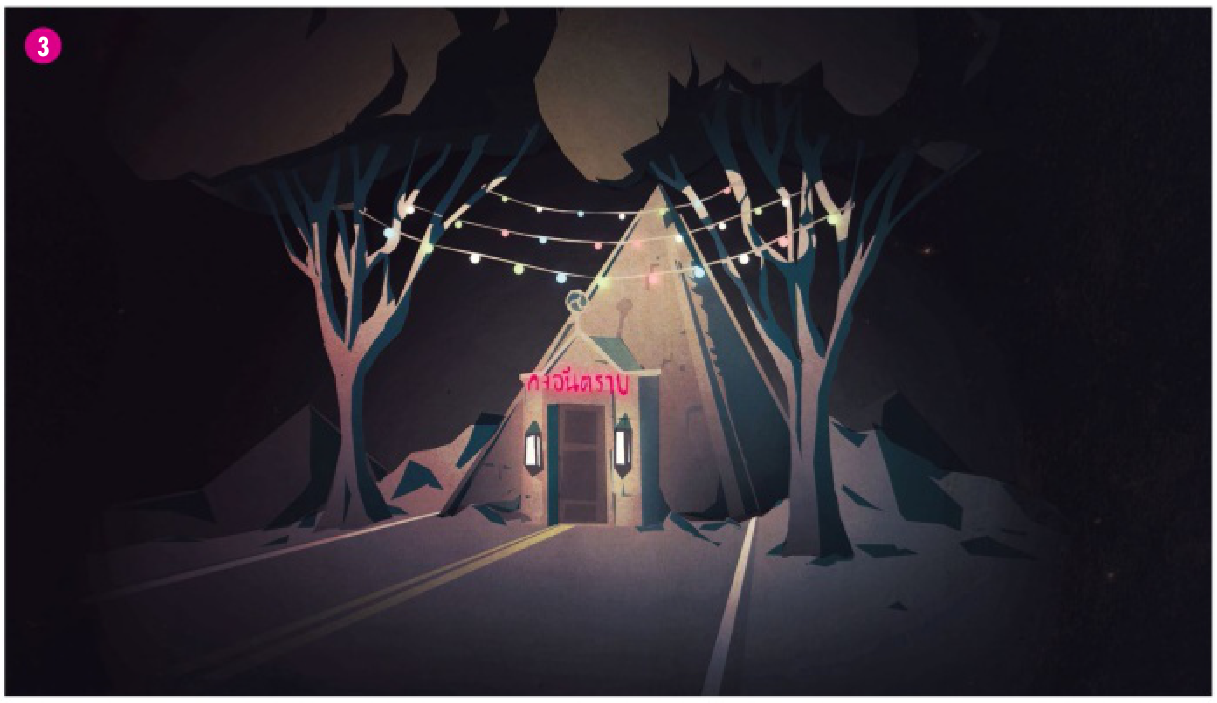
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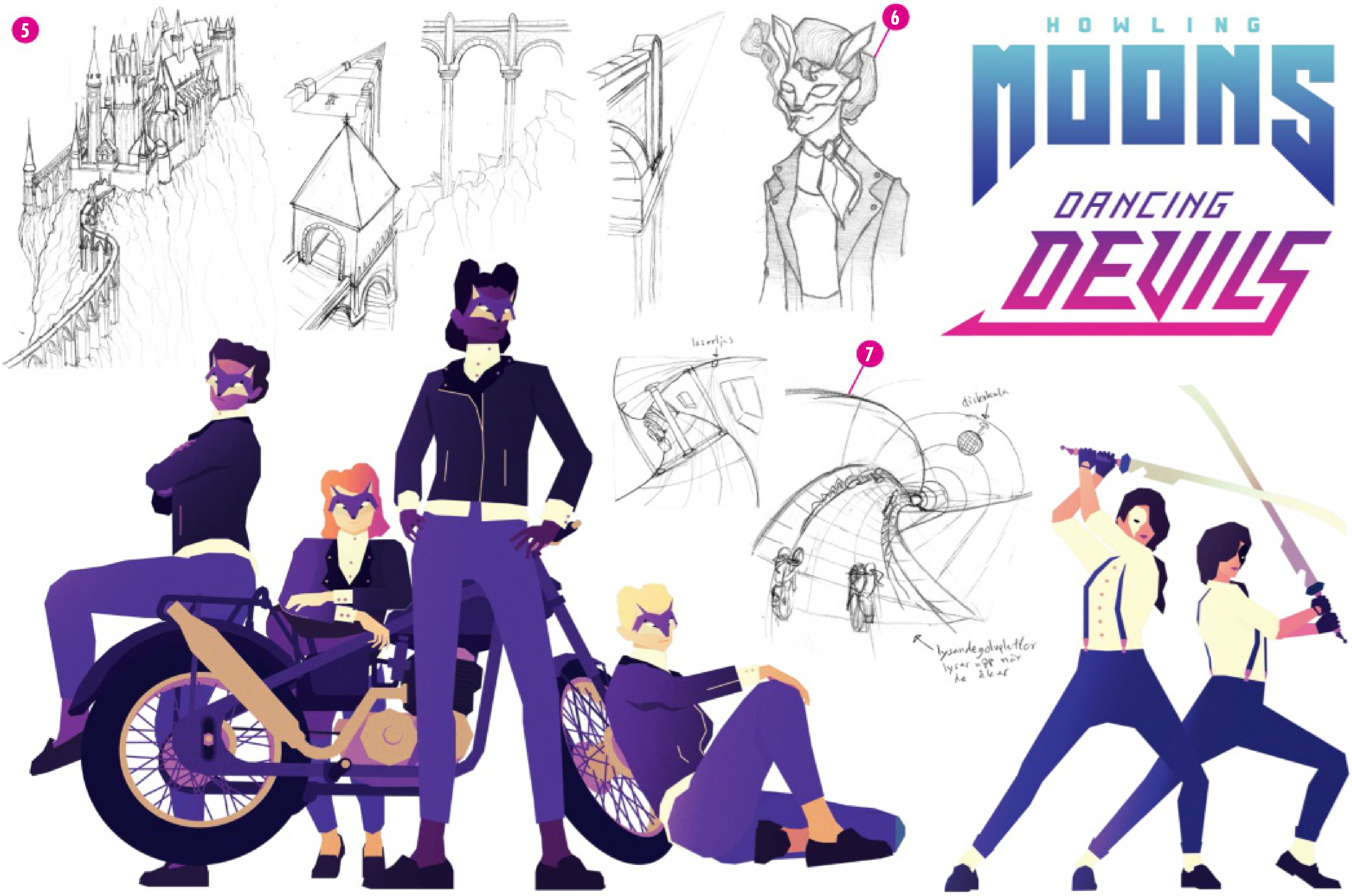
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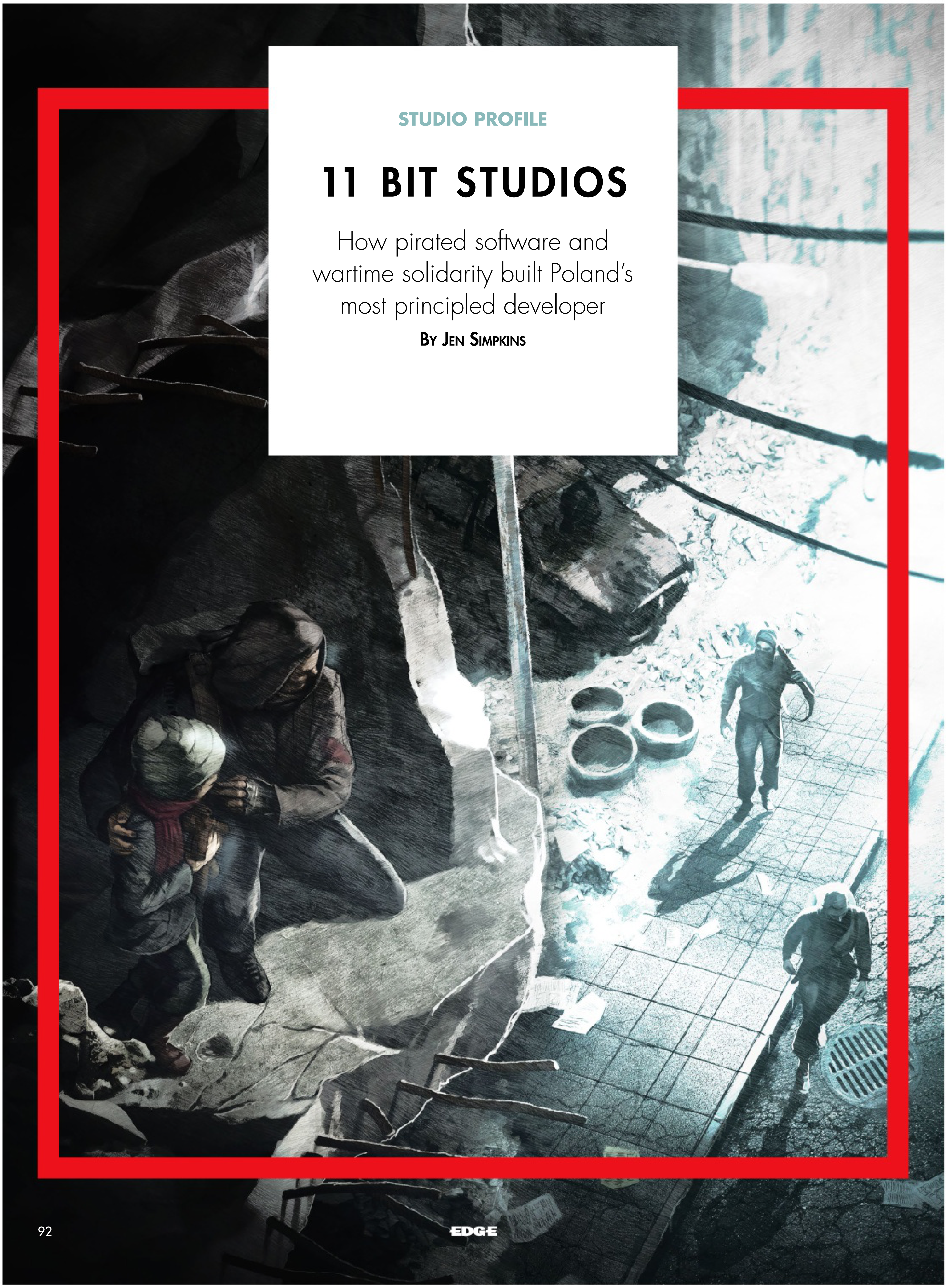


STUDIO PROFILE

11 BIT STUDIOS

How pirated software and wartime solidarity built Poland's most principled developer

By Jen Simpkins

Founded 2010
Employees 113
Key staff Grzegorz Miechowski, Paweł Miechowski, Jakub Stokalski, Marta Fijak, Łukasz Juszczyk
URL 11bitstudios.com
Selected softography *Anomaly: Warzone Earth, Anomaly 2, Funky Smugglers, Sleepwalker's Journey, This War Of Mine, Frostpunk*
Current projects Three TBA

Winter has arrived in Warsaw, a city that needs no further encouragement to look surly. But our welcome to 11 Bit Studios couldn't be warmer: over beer and pierogi, **Paweł Miechowski** speaks fondly of his country, and of the studio he's been a part of since before it was even called 11 Bit.

Metropolis Software was one of the very first game-development studios in Poland: "There were like, ten studios in the country, and compared to the west there was no real know-how of how to make games – just passion, and love," he tells us. The studio was co-founded by Adrian Chmielarz and Miechowski's brother, Gzregorz: its first game was *Tajemnica Statuetki*, or *The Mystery Of The Statuette*, which was released in 1991, two years after communism collapsed. It was a breakthrough moment for Poland, for Metropolis – and for the 17-year-old Miechowski, who spent much of his time hanging around "the older guys" at the studio when he wasn't at school, helping them box up games on 3.5-inch disks. One day, Miechowski's brother asked if he could help to render animations on a game they were making called *The Prince And The Coward*. "I was putting them together in ProAnimator, or something like this?" he tells us. "An illegal copy, because a) there were no legal copies on the market and b) we were too poor to afford legal copies, for sure."

While Metropolis continued to make games – even bagging, then selling to Polish publisher CD Projekt, the rights to make a game based on a certain fantasy novel series called The Witcher – Miechowski attended university. He returned in 2003 to join the team full-time. Chmielarz had recently left following a disagreement with his studio co-founder. In 2007, CD Projekt – now the biggest player in the Polish game industry thanks to *The Witcher*'s success – acquired Metropolis, now about 40 people strong, with the intention of marketing its latest project: *They*. "Which is a lame name," Miechowski says, "but it was a working title. The real title was *Interference*." The game featured highly customisable weapons that you could build yourself from parts. Miechowski was its lead writer; it was a tale of "super-secret powers taking over the world, loosely based on Lost." Despite being over halfway complete, with the weapons system working, CD Projekt cancelled it in 2009 for business reasons.

"The word 'indie' was not often used back then," Miechowski says. "But our idea was to make indie games in terms of size, but focused on super-original gameplay ideas that mixed genres. But [CD Projekt] was not so much into this idea." This having now been made quite clear, the majority of Metropolis' key members left the company. Miechowski was moved over to quest design on *The Witcher: Rise Of The White Wolf*. He knew nobody, "and I had never worked in the Aurora engine, so I felt kind of lost – I didn't really know what I was doing. So I decided to leave." (Shortly afterwards, CD Projekt would shutter Metropolis, too.) With a baby on the way, and few jobs in games to choose from, he began working at a coffee shop to make ends meet. But then, he got a phonecall from his former colleagues. "They said, 'We're starting a new company, and we need a writer and marketing guy'." It was 2010, and 11 Bit Studios (the odd number in the name implying its unorthodox approach to development) was born.

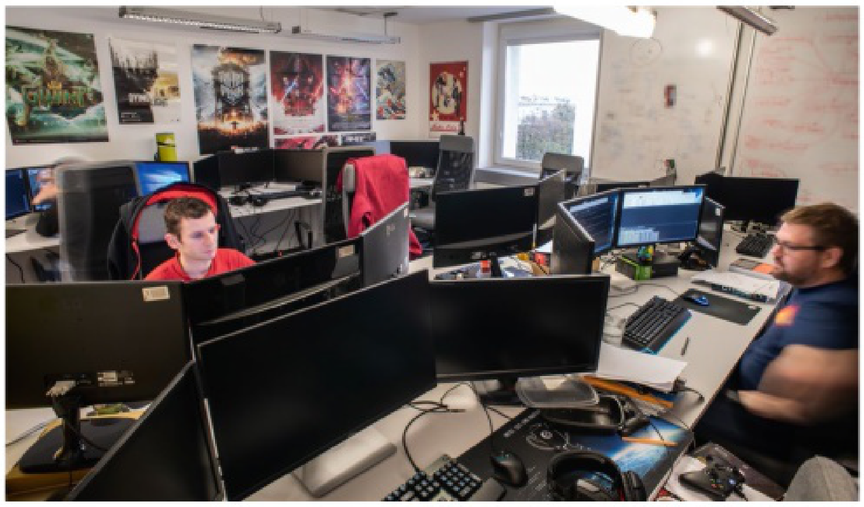
From left: Jakub Stokalski, Marta Fijak and Paweł Miechowski in 11 Bit's unexpectedly cheery meeting hub

THE TEAM'S GOAL: "TO MIX GENRES, PUT GENRES UPSIDE-DOWN, JUST LOOK FOR NEW GAMEPLAY IDEAS"

Finally, the team could start to work towards the goal they'd had at CD Projekt "to mix genres, put genres upside-down, just look for new gameplay ideas." They had sent Miechowski a prototype that inverted the usual structure of a tower-defence game, making it a kind of tower-*offence* game – it convinced him to come aboard to write the game's dialogue as well as managing PR and marketing. *Anomaly: Warzone Earth* released in 2011 when 11 Bit was just 12 people in a flat in Warsaw. "I was in my native environment, with friends I'd been working with for 15 years." They were all in one room, so communication was simple, and their vision was easily realised. "Plus, we were lucky, because we decided to start an independent team in an era where the market was relatively empty," Miechowski admits. "There were three, maybe four games released on Steam a week, so each game got the proper visibility."

***Anomaly* sold well** – even before 11 Bit redesigned it for mobiles, shrinking level sizes and adding in more checkpoints, selling hundreds of thousands of units on the booming App Store and Android Market. Small mobile releases that didn't require too many resources to make (*Funky Smugglers*, *Sleepwalker's Journey*, and sequels to *Anomaly*) formed the basis of their business strategy for the next few years. *Anomaly 2* marked a dark point in the studio's lifetime: "I felt burnt out, and like we were becoming too repetitive. It wasn't pushing us forward," Miechowski says. "But when we released *Anomaly*, we were already in the process of developing a new game called *Shelter*." It was a decent survival game, but it lacked a hook. But Gzregorz Miechowski had been reading articles about the survivors of the Bosnian War. "He was struck by how people struggle for simple things, like clean water, food, bandages – things you have everywhere when you're living in a peaceful country." With Warsaw's own bomb-scarred buildings surrounding us, it's not difficult to see why the elder Miechowski was so touched by the results of his research. "He said, 'Let's make *Shelter* about this, about civilians in war.' And that's how *This War Of Mine* was born."

11 Bit's initial philosophy of turning genres on their heads had served it well, but it had quickly started to feel insufficient. *This War Of Mine* marked the first time the studio realised it



We ask what kind of person you have to be to work at 11 Bit. "You have to have a beard," Stokalski and Fijak joke, simultaneously: Juszcyck explains that articles often refer to them as "the beard guys". The more serious answer? "Maturity is quite important," Fijak says

needed to change its motto: from now on, it would dedicate itself to making meaningful games with social impact. "I remember the meeting when everybody said, 'This is definitely it – let's do it'," Miechowski says. "We knew it was going to be risky."

The game portrayed its serious subject matter with a raw brutality, and Miechowski was unsure of what the reaction would be. A trip to GDC reassured him that they were on the right path; the reactions from journalists were exceedingly positive. "So when I came back, I literally told the team, 'Let's not fuck this up, because we have something special on our hands'," he laughs. "And I remember the guys, they printed – in Polish, of course – 'Let's not fuck this up', and they stuck it to all the monitors." Humour became something of a coping mechanism for the studio for the next two years; the research was both intellectually and emotionally gruelling, and there was no guarantee players would understand or even be interested. "Sometimes laughter was a way to fight off the pressure," Miechowski says. It wasn't your ordinary launch: the trailer featured testimonial from Emir, a survivor of the siege of Sarajevo. But *This War Of Mine* was a hit, recouping development costs in just two days, and winning countless awards. 11 Bit had found its calling. "We were reassured that that driving philosophy is something we really want to go for. You're not only making a piece of entertainment, but something with a message. And if we can change at least one person's mind because of a game, then hell, it's worth it."

11 Bit started publishing games in 2014, a savvy business move that has contributed much to the large, modern building Miechowski gives us a tour of the next day (it's currently planning to move into an even bigger space a few kilometres down the road). But difficult-second-album syndrome set in with the next in-house project. The prototype wasn't inspiring the studio – nor **Jakub Stokalski**, who would eventually become the project's lead after joining in 2015. "There was nothing that really gripped us," he says, as we study a bleakly beautiful diorama of the house in 11 Bit's defining title. "*This War Of Mine* and the success that came with it changed the playing field for the company. After that, there was really no going back to doing just small, fun match-three games. Not to disrespect any genre, but for us, as a studio, it wouldn't fit any more." It was only at the end of 2015, when Stokalski saw a concept document portraying a world undergoing global cooling (the player must build their city around a generator to keep warm, and makes tough moral decisions to keep their society both alive and functional) that he was convinced that this could be a game worthy of 11 Bit.

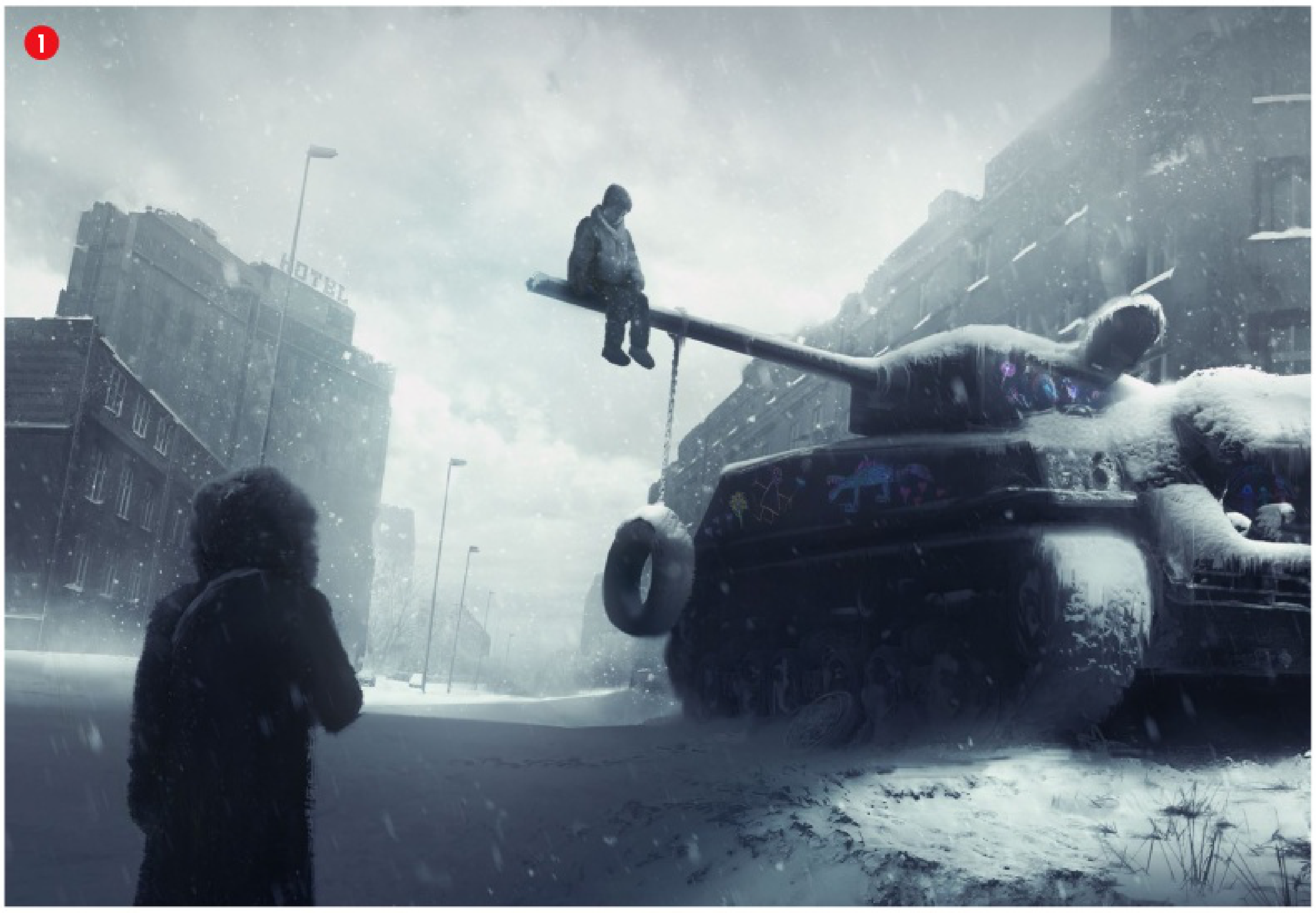
"IF WE CAN CHANGE AT LEAST ONE PERSON'S MIND BECAUSE OF A GAME, THEN HELL, IT'S WORTH IT"

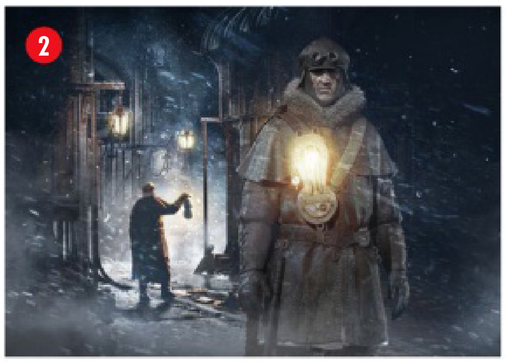
For the studio, it's about ensuring they don't settle for the easy answer. "It's like, this process of asking 'Why?' five times," Stokalski says. "This is what kids do, and it's a useful way of looking at things. By the end of the day, you can end up in a very strange place," he laughs. "Other times, you arrive at things that are true and not trivial – which is the sweet spot we're always trying to shoot for." Lead artist **Łukasz Juszczyk** impresses on us the importance of creating a "mood" for the studio's games. "It's the place where design clicks with art. And knowing that really helps ease the tension between developers on each level, because we are all aware of what we want to do, and it spreads to the whole team."

He recalls such tensions back in 2015; once *Frostpunk*'s message clicked – and **Marta Fijak** pulled the team through the hardest part of dev, which was balancing the society's mechanical and tonal subtleties – there was no stopping its success. It sold over 250,000 copies in its first three days, and 1.4 million within a year.

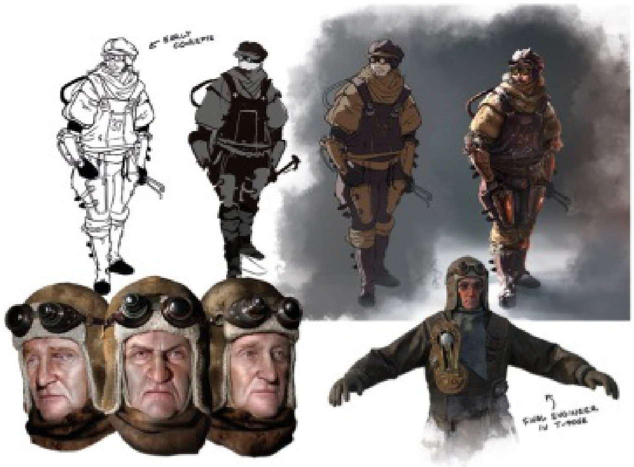
Fijak, inspired by socially conscious games such as *This War Of Mine* and *Papers, Please*, left a job making free-to-play mobile games to work at 11 Bit. "I was passionate about those games that wanted to tell something more, something important. It doesn't have to be depressing! But just something more worthwhile."

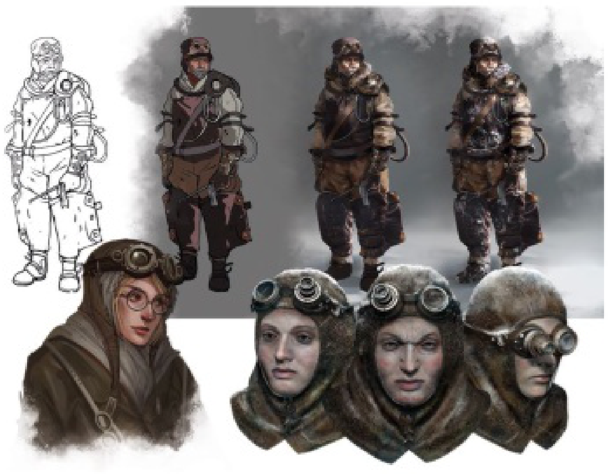
Indeed, she's aware that they are in danger of being pegged as "the depression people. Meaningfulness is not only hidden in painful emotions or stories of sacrifice; there are things that are meaningful in day-to-day life that are not as bleak and depressing." She's leading 11 Bit's next game (working title Project 8), which is about to go into pre-production, and is "a celebration of a part of life – there are parts that are grim, but it's brighter than *Frostpunk* and *This War Of Mine*." Stokalski grins: "There's this running question around the company: 'How would you make a comedy game?' Funny in a meaningful way, you know. It's still an unanswered question. But some of the most profound things are being said through comedy." It might be mid-afternoon and dark already in Warsaw, but 11 Bit's future looks bright. ■





❶ According to Miechowski, *This War Of Mine* was the first 11 Bit game to come from a paper prototype. Now, it's the studio's preferred way to work. ❷ Juszczyk, lead artist on *Frostpunk,* often takes his team to Warsaw's art galleries to talk shop and recharge creative energies. Musical jam sessions and hikes are also popular – as is vodka. "You know creative industries," Miechowski laughs. "We like to drink. We're Slavs"





PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Ring Fit Adventure Switch
We thought the iPad was humanity's greatest proxy babysitter, but Switch's fitness curio has it licked: this tires the little horrors out, as well as keeping them occupied. While notionally a singleplayer pursuit, there's much fun to be had taking turns – but heavens, we need a little more recovery time. We're normally happy to help our offspring when they're stuck on a boss battle, but not when our knees are still killing us from yesterday's session.

Slay The Spire PC
Yep, still, and we will be for a while – but hey, it's stopped us writing about *Destiny* again. When we're not playing *Slay The Spire*, we're thinking about it; when we're not thinking about it, we're watching it, and specifically its biggest streamer. Jorbs' becalming presence and immaculate deck-building helps us on our quest to peel away the countless layers of complexity in one of the most beguiling games of the year.

Spring Falls iOS
A reminder that there are still plenty of good mobile games outside the confines of Apple Arcade, Eric Billingsley's gentle puzzler asks you to direct pools of water to feed plants on hexagonal mountainsides. Fascinatingly, Billingsley was lead programmer on *Cuphead*; we could have used something like this as a palate cleanser between attempts at that infuriating robot battle. But as a soothing balm for the stresses of deadline week, it more than does the trick.

Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

98 **Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

102 **Planet Zoo**
PC

106 **Pokémon Sword & Shield**
Switch

110 **Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

112 **Monomals**
iOS

114 **Manifold Garden**
iOS, PC

116 **Concrete Genie**
PS4

118 **Superliminal**
PC

120 **Lonely Mountains: Downhill**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

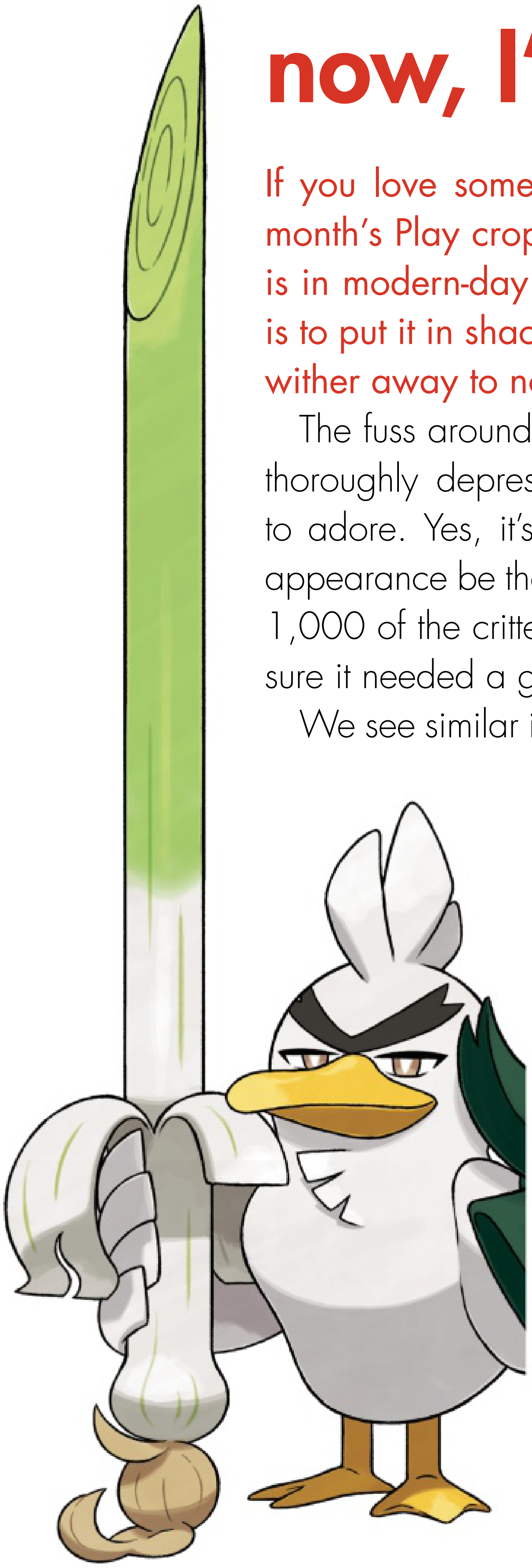
122 **Mosaic**
iOS, PC

I'm on a thousand downers now, I'm Drowzee

If you love something, apparently, you're supposed to set it free. Yet this month's Play crop serves as an unsettling reminder of how rare that attitude is in modern-day videogame fandoms. On this evidence, to love something is to put it in shackles; to insist it always stay the same lest your passion for it wither away to nothing. Or, you know, make death threats.

The fuss around *Pokémon Sword & Shield* (p106) has been remarkable, and thoroughly depressing given the nature of the games its community purports to adore. Yes, it's disappointing to see the mainline series' first home-console appearance be the first to not include the entire Pokédex. But there are more than 1,000 of the critters now, and at some point something had to give. We're not sure it needed a global hate campaign, but welcome to videogames in 2019.

We see similar in *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare* (p110). As the title suggests, it sees Infinity Ward seek a return to first principles, with a slower, more tactical pace and less gimmicky action than recent *COD*s have displayed. To players of a certain vintage, who found themselves less able to keep up with each new *COD*'s progressively faster SMG murder carousel – cough – this is manna from heaven. The supposedly passionate core, however, are up in arms, unable to side with a developer seeking to slow the sad decline of a former king if it means taking their toys away. Worse still, if early updates are any guide, Infinity Ward is giving in.



It's all exhausting, honestly. The way the internet has given communities a rallying point has been wonderful, bringing people together and enabling passionate fandoms to foster. But maybe being a longterm fan of something is a recipe for disaster, and it's time to find something new. If anyone needs us, we'll be out there stanning for *Planet Zoo* (p102).

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order

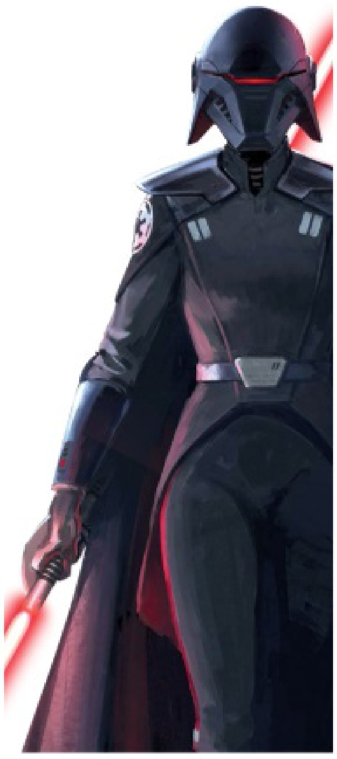
Developer Respawn Entertainment
Publisher Electronic Arts
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

So then, *Star Wars: Prepare To Die Edition*? Or – apologies in advance – *Darth Souls*? Not quite. Sure, the FromSoft DNA runs deep in *Fallen Order*'s veins. It's there in the meditation spots, the brief save havens where you can rest, unlock new skills and restore your stock of healing items, respawning local enemies in the process. It's there in the level design, where complex corkscrews of maps become a little simpler to navigate using shortcuts. And it's in the combat, where enemies hit hard, patience and persistence win the day and receiving a fatal blow means dropping your recent winnings. But it's not FromSoftware's 2011 classic that most comes to mind as we work through *Fallen Order*. Rather, it's its sequel. While it is not without its moments of majestic beauty, for much of its runtime *Fallen Order* is a flatly lit, blandly textured game with character models that would have looked out of date a decade ago. And we can't remember the last time we played a game with so many lengthy lift rides, our hero standing stock-still for 30 seconds or more while the next area loads in. Wait, we can. It was *Dark Souls II*.

Combat is, in fairness, more *Sekiro* than *Souls*; indeed, the similarities are remarkable given the relative lack of time between FromSoft's ninja epic and this. While your ultimate aim is to empty an enemy's health bar, you've got to break their guard first, either by blocking or parrying their attacks or by forcing them to guard one too many of your own. Rank-and-file stormtroopers go down simply enough, but tougher variants that need a little more effort soon show up, with the opening that follows each successful guard break only draining a chunk of their health. And, as in *Sekiro*, enemies have unblockable attacks, though these are rather easier to read: rather than obscure the action with a *Sekiro*-style alert, the enemy's entire body glows red to signal it's time to dodge.

Despite the apparent focus on parries – the timing window is a defining element of the four difficulty levels on offer – *Fallen Order*'s evasion mechanics should not be overlooked. Tilt the stick and tap a face button for a quick sidestep; double-tap it for a longer dodge-roll – this is genre-standard stuff, and essential for creating space or avoiding unblockables. Leave the stick in neutral, however, and protagonist Cal Kestis will perform *God Hand*-style bobs and weaves. This, despite all the lightsabers and acrobatics, is as pure an expression of the Jedi power fantasy as we've seen throughout EA's time with the Star Wars licence, of powerful, elegant control distilled into a single, delicious button press. Time it perfectly and time will briefly slow, the resulting window of opportunity a few vital frames longer than if you'd blocked or parried the incoming attack. It's a great feeling, one only rivalled by the perfect parry that returns a stormtrooper's phaser bolt for a one-shot kill.

Enemy types are smartly mixed, demanding, as in From's work, a constant, careful act of battlefield triage

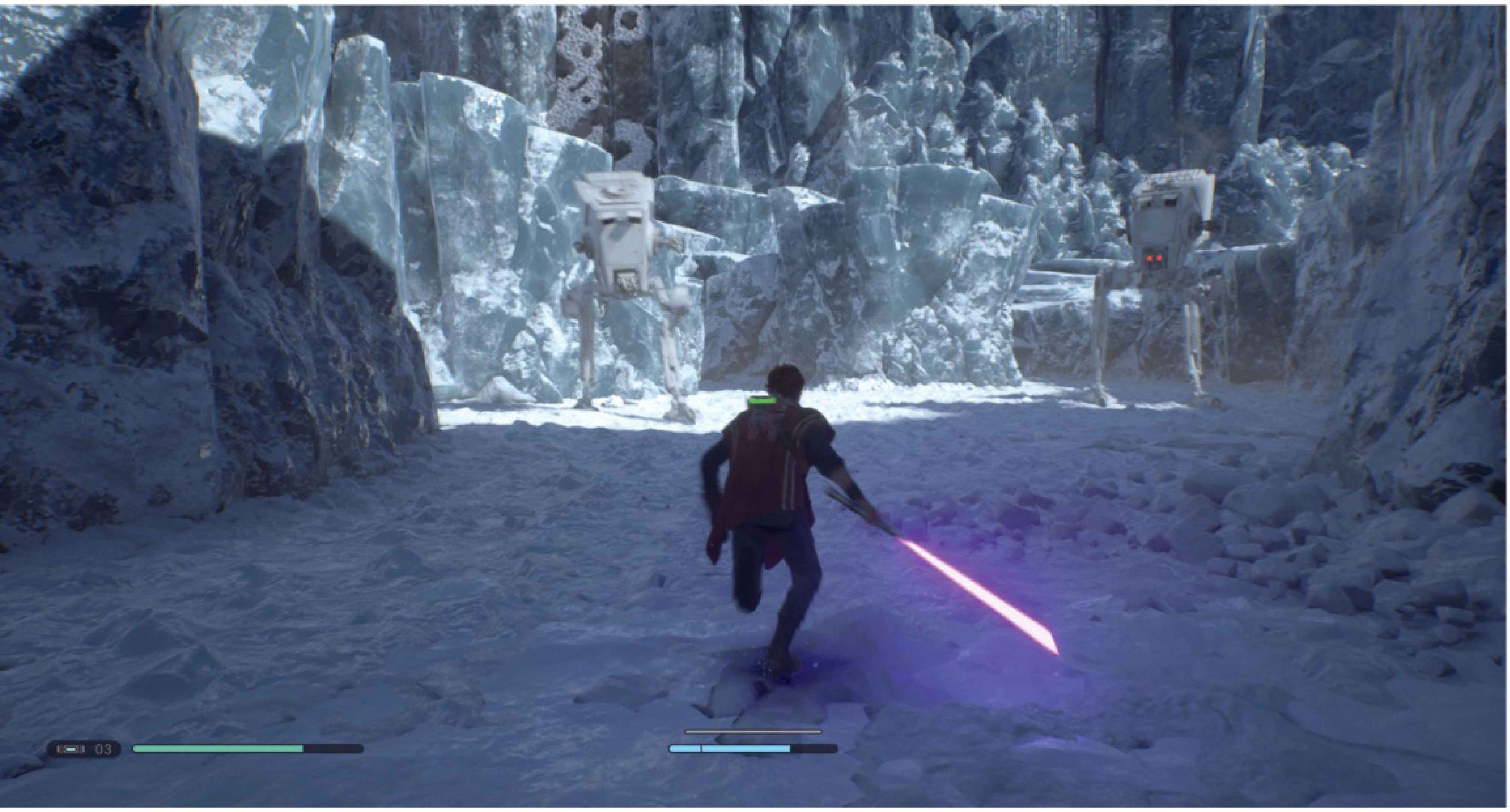


Combat is where *Fallen Order* shines the brightest, particularly later on once you've unlocked most of the skill tree, the story has doled out a couple of lightsaber upgrades, and an early game where too much of your time is spent fighting outsized bugs has given way to a far more engaging running battle with the Empire. Enemy types are smartly mixed, demanding, as in From's work, a constant, careful act of battlefield triage. Yes, you might have a security droid, a purge trooper and a couple of grunts closing in on you, but the rifleman hanging out at the back of the room should be dealt with first. And once you learn to incorporate the Jedi powers you steadily acquire through the campaign – Force Slow, Push and Pull – into your arsenal, and are able to redesign each combat puzzle on your own terms, *Fallen Order* steps out of the shadow of the games on which its battle system so blatantly draws, and displays a certain identity of its own.

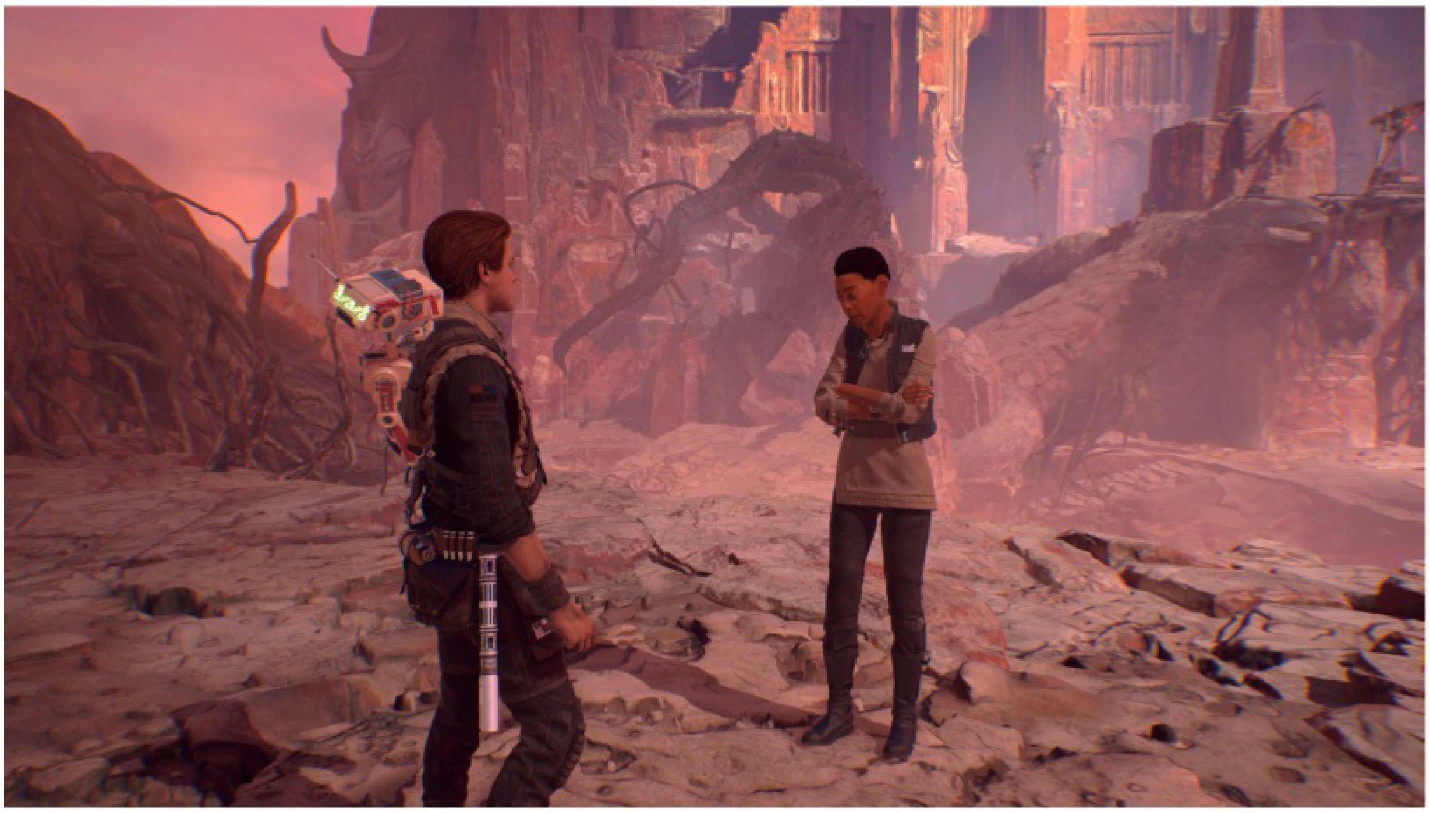
While said powers are only an optional tool during fights, they form the building blocks of *Fallen Order*'s level design. While at first the game presents itself as a product of the school of *Uncharted* – of clambering and battling to to the next set-piece or checkpoint – its five planets are more akin to *Metroid* levels or a *Zelda* dungeon: you fight your way in using your existing tools, find some new ability or doodad, then use it to access new routes. The planets are surprisingly large: sprawling, multi-storey constructions with shortcuts all over and, in theory, plenty to go back and mop up once the credits have rolled. There are large single-room puzzles that are often so obtuse they wouldn't have been out of place in an early *Tomb Raider*. Exploration is typically rewarded with a loot chest containing a new cosmetic skin for your lightsaber, clothing or robot companion, and a chunk of XP. Sometimes, however, you'll find a powerful named miniboss or a bespoke puzzle yielding a useful reward, such as an extra stim canister for healing mid-fight.

The larger the level, however, the more frustrating it is. A couple of planets are simply too big, particularly given the game's insistence that, after you've worked your way through the level and completed your main objective, you must then schlep all the way back to your ship on foot. In the right hands, this is a fine device: we will never forget the abject terror upon realising that, after inching our way through the depths of *Dark Souls*' poison-filled Blighttown and finally defeating the boss, we then had to fight our way back to the surface. But Blighttown had its waterwheel, its bonfire tunnel, its ominous, rickety town; it had landmarks, and you'd died enough on the way down to know how to get back up. *Fallen Order*'s levels, for all their sprawl, lack character, and are too cluttered with routes for any of

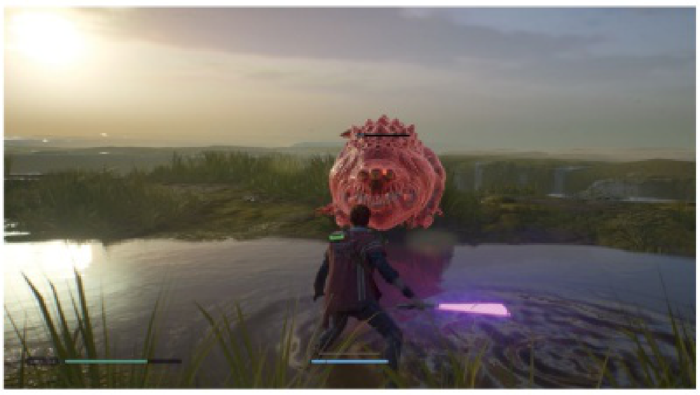
▶



ABOVE This might look like a threatening situation, but AT-STs are an absolute pushover. Simply block gunfire on the approach, then watch out for grenades while you slash away at their legs.
RIGHT Given her prominence in the story, the lack of detail on your ally Cere's character model is a surprise, particularly given the attention lavished on her crewmate Greez



BELOW The game takes a little too long to put you in environments that feel truly Star Wars. The late game is full of them, however



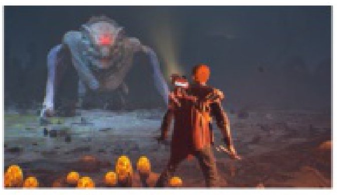
ABOVE The red glow that heralds an imminent unblockable attack may be much easier to read than *Sekiro*'s intrusive kanji, but that gives Respawn licence to play around with startup timings. Some come lightning fast

Well, everything looks better if you zoom out far enough, doesn't it. A brief session with the PC version suggests fidelity is a little higher there than on Xbox One X, where it's one of the visual disappointments of the year

them to stick in the memory. And so, with your objective complete, you might spend an hour or more retracing your steps, increasingly wearily, until you happen across the required path. There's a map – a 3D holographic effort – but it's an absolute disaster on the larger planets, making it all but impossible to ascertain the way to a distant objective. On you trudge, looping back round to the same identikit cave or corridor, trying to remember if you went left, right, or straight ahead last time. Left? Oh, look, this bit again. Surely somewhere in Star Wars lore Respawn could have found narrative justification for a fast-travel mechanic. At the very least, a waypoint system.

Not only do these environments lack character; many are positively ugly on Xbox One X. Broadly speaking, the bigger the planet, the worse it looks, the logical assumption being that, with an immovable ship deadline looming, Respawn has had to scale back on detail to ensure the game runs in stable fashion. While Kestis himself largely escapes the fidelity cull – indeed, at times it seems as if half the available processing power is managing his hair physics – some of the character models are absolutely miserable. The wookiees look so ragged and unthreatening that we'd quite happily say it to their faces. And despite all this, the game still falls apart at the seams sometimes. It drops frames like a clumsy glazier, it stutters and hitches between rooms, and you'll often arrive in a new area 30 seconds or more before the skybox and scenery. One late-game cutscene, meanwhile, is rather robbed of its intended drama by virtue of the audio being two seconds out of sync.

It's a bit of a mess, really, yet even in its weaker moments we find it hard to put *Fallen Order* down.



FORCE COMPANY

Boss battles are a highlight of the *Souls* series, but they're sparingly used in *Fallen Order*, and are one of the clearest examples of a narrative-driven Star Wars game perhaps not being the best fit for the template. While, even on the second of four difficulty tiers, they're no pushovers, too few of the fights actually finish on your own terms; rather, the game waits for you to reach an invisibile trigger – normally reducing the boss' health bar to a certain percentage – before the cinematic team takes over. Some enemies are spared because the story needs them later on; others because a rescue ship turns up, or someone else arrives to steal the kill. From a story perspective, it all makes a certain sense. But it means that the game deflates you at the precise point where it should be most satisfying.

While the story is bog-standard genre stuff, it's smartly crafted around planet-hopping, even if its central thesis – Kestis is following instructions left by a dead Jedi that will eventually lead him to a secret list of Force-sensitive children – is essentially a 25-hour shopping list of MacGuffins. And if those dodgy character models prevent us from taking most of the central cast with the seriousness Respawn would like us to, there's no faulting the clear star of the show. Your robot companion BD-1 is a delight, its puppyish gait and cutesy head-tilts affording this hunk of virtual metal more charm and personality than you'll find anywhere else in the game. It's a work of real Star Wars pedigree, too, its voice crafted by legendary audio designer Ben Burtt. Also notable is Greez, your ship's captain, cook and complainer-in-chief, an inveterate gambler with a thick, withering New York accent. Beyond that, pickings are slim.

It's a strange old thing, all told. It's the sort of thing we didn't think got made any more – a loveably shonky licensed game – that doesn't care that it's supposed to be a romp. It's a game with more massmarket appeal than anything else released this year that is perfectly happy to have you banging your head against a boss fight or opaque puzzle chamber for several evenings on the trot. There's a sad sort of irony in the wanton leaden-footedness of a game that's so clearly been rushed out of the door, yes. But as uneven and unpolished as it is, *Fallen Order* is still the best game to emerge from EA's stewardship of the Star Wars licence, even if that's to damn it with faint praise.

7

Post Script

EA's handling of the most coveted IP on the planet has been poor, but could anyone else do better?

Back in January, reports emerged that Andrew Wilson, CEO of Electronic Arts, wasn't particularly happy with his company having the rights to make Star Wars videogames, and never had been. It's easy enough to see that being the case. The deal was inked before he took his seat in the big chair, negotiated by former CEO John Riccitiello, who now holds the same role at Unity, and Frank Gibeau, ex-head of EA Labels and now CEO of Zynga. While it's hard to see winning the videogame rights to one of the biggest names in entertainment as anything but a positive, Star Wars was never an ideal fit for a company whose business is built on annual iterations to big-name sports games, and a new *Battlefield* every other year.

EA's brief forays outside its wheelhouse over the last couple of generations have hardly set the world alight critically or commercially. Under Wilson, the publisher's emphasis on highly monetisable service-games has only intensified – and little wonder, given *FIFA*'s Ultimate Team mode brings in a billion dollars a year. Yet Wilson's reported concern is not solely rooted in how Star Wars fits the EA business model; it is also, perhaps even more so, a problem with Star Wars itself.

Working with such a big licence as this brings a set of unique pressures. There is an expectation of lavish production values, ubiquitous marketing and a colossally high quality bar. There is also a much bigger, and far broader, volume of eyeballs on a Star Wars game than there is on a *FIFA*, *Madden* or *Battlefield*. When the new *FIFA* makes another billion dollars with its hybrid of fruit machine and sticker album, no one really bats an eyelid. The audience is used to it, the media doesn't really care about it, and the shareholders are too busy lighting cigars with hundreds to even consider the ethics of it all. When EA did the same with Star Wars, as it did with the miserable, lootbox-infested *Battlefront II*, the outcry was enormous, and widespread. Indeed, it was the game that prompted governments around the world to begin investigating, and in some cases legislating against, one of the financial cornerstones of EA's entire business.

So, yes, you can see why Wilson might not be particularly enamoured with a licence he inherited, that is a poor fit for the business he wants to run, and indeed threatens its very core. Equally, you can imagine that Disney has been less than delighted with EA's stewardship of the brand so far. Since the deal was agreed in 2013 it has yielded the bare-bones *Battlefield* reskin, *Star Wars Battlefront*; its somewhat more fleshed-out, but immeasurably more controversial, 2017 sequel; the likeable, though flawed *Fallen Order*; and a handful of forgettable mobile games. Meanwhile, EA's MMO *The Old Republic*, released in 2011, trundles on, all but forgotten. A planned singleplayer action-adventure to be directed by *Uncharted* co-creator Amy Hennig – on paper at least, EA's greatest shot at Star Wars greatness – was canned, primarily because EA decided to make it in one of the most expensive cities on the planet.

There is a much bigger, and far broader, volume of eyeballs on a Star Wars game than there is on a FIFA, Madden or Battlefield

Yet the deal, currently at least, runs until 2024. While it might seem a safe assumption that neither party will be particularly keen on extending it, it's hard to identify a better home. There aren't many game companies that operate at EA's scale, after all, and among those that do, how many inspire confidence that they'd really do a better job? Activision Blizzard may have the money, but it is going through an awkward transition: the Eric Hirshberg era saw it focus on a small number of highly lucrative franchises – *Call Of Duty*, *World Of Warcraft*, *Destiny*, *Skylanders* – and all are now either on the wane or already gone. Despite its profile, it lacks an internal studio network, and almost all of the handful it does own are too busy on the *Call Of Duty* carousel. Blizzard could do wonders with the licence, you'd fancy, but it is not exactly fleet of developmental foot, and both Activision and Disney would probably expect more than one game in a decade.

Ubisoft has the resources, at least: its rolling, 24/7 development schedule is the envy of the industry. But it also works to a formula, and while it could probably knock out three or four *Assassin's Creed*-style lightsaber games in ten years, the idea doesn't exactly set the pulse racing. And beyond that, who is there? Perhaps a global juggernaut such as Tencent could give it a go, though it's more of an investor than it is a publisher. A platform holder would surely pay through the nose for it – there would be no finer competitive advantage than this as we embark on a new console generation – but exclusivity doesn't seem right for such a colossal IP.

Perhaps, then, the best licensing deal that Disney could make when the sun sets on its relationship with EA would be no deal at all – or rather, no long-term one. We don't need a decade of Ubisoft Star Wars games, but we'd quite like one of them. Perhaps Activision could carve out some free time for the *COD* teams to put something together, or give a team at Blizzard ten years and see what emerges from it. See what Tencent's financial might could bring to the table, and perhaps also give smaller creators a shot in between the tentpole blockbusters. There are few things more deflating than a disappointing Star Wars game, primarily because the potential is so enormous. Perhaps sharing this most coveted of videogame licences a little wider will one day see it fulfilled. ■

Planet Zoo

Developer/publisher Frontier Developments
Format PC
Release Out now

Planet Zoo is capable of moments of great peace. Those times when you lose yourself in the busywork of building and planting and tweaking, letting the gentle soundtrack guide you into a sort of trance. When you lock the camera into a close-up on your favourite resident – in our case, an incredibly chill red panda – and just watch them do their thing for a while. Or, best of all, when you zoom out into the clouds for that everywhere-the-light-touches view, hit the triple-speed button, and soak in the satisfaction of a machine beautifully designed – before, inevitably, spotting that one thing that could do with improvement and getting sucked right back into that meditative loop of build, plant, tweak, emerging a couple of hours later unsure when exactly it got light outside.

Unfortunately, *Planet Zoo* is also capable of causing intense frustration. The controls can be like wrangling a disobedient animal – discovering your mouse and keyboard have turned feral, the camera launching through the level geometry to visit the zoo's own personal Upside Down. The game comes with a library of keyboard shortcuts that will make you long for the days of printed manuals, but there are still some baffling omissions. There's no key to rotate the camera, for example, leaving you to rely on the hold-and-drag mouse controls – which is how we ended up looking at our zoo from the underside.

The game is also lousy with bugs. We have multiple experiences of campaign objectives failing to register that we've completed them, and one particularly bad instance of a zookeeper disappearing. She is carrying a crate with a newly-adopted timber wolf inside to its enclosure. We look away for one second, and in that time they have both popped out of existence. We find her eventually, buried a couple of metres underground in that expanse of negative space the game seems so oddly fond of. Months have passed in-game, but her legs continue to pump away at some imagined pavement: she's still trying to deliver the wolf. We reload an earlier save.

Our notes are littered with these kinds of grumbles. Buildings don't snap into place the way you'd hope, meaning construction is often a faff. The tutorials dwell on the easy stuff, and never explain more complex techniques like terrain deformation or dealing with slopes. The menus explain themselves precisely half the time, and it's never the half you need. There are way too many spiders. The thing is, though, the reason these kinds of complaints dominate our notes is probably those hours-long gaps where the game swallows us whole and we forget about writing things down.

These note-taking hiatuses all result from the game's Challenge mode. This is *Planet Zoo* at its purest. Career begins as a string of tutorial missions in prefab zoos, and even once it starts to give you a blank slate, there's always the knowledge that your stewardship is only temporary, until you earn that gold star and can move on. Sandbox hands you unlimited money and maxed-out research trees, but in doing so robs the game of a little urgency.

Challenge gives you a plot of land, a little starting money and just leaves you to it. You pick the biome and continent – which dictate the climate and backdrop but not much else – and turn that land into whatever takes your fancy. Unsightly hill right where you'd planned to stick the giraffes? You can level it out, or even excavate the land to create one of those sunken enclosures. Then, of course, you'll want to make it inviting to your long-necked transplants. You resurface the whole thing, pulling up roots and laying down bare soil, pick out trees and rocks to remind the giraffes of their savanna home and arrange them just so.

Finally, a couple of engrossing hours later, you unfreeze time and get to watch the animals settle into what you've built for them. And, oh, those animals. They're an incredible achievement: photorealistic down to the last bristle of fur, moving in a way that'll trick your construction-addled brain into forgetting they're just a bundle of status bars. Watching these creatures nose at their toys, scrap with a rival or paddle around the pool would probably be enough to justify *Planet Zoo*'s existence. But it's more meaningful because you researched to unlock that toy, because you made the mistake of adopting two female bears and putting them in the same pen, because you spent ages figuring out how to dig a pond.

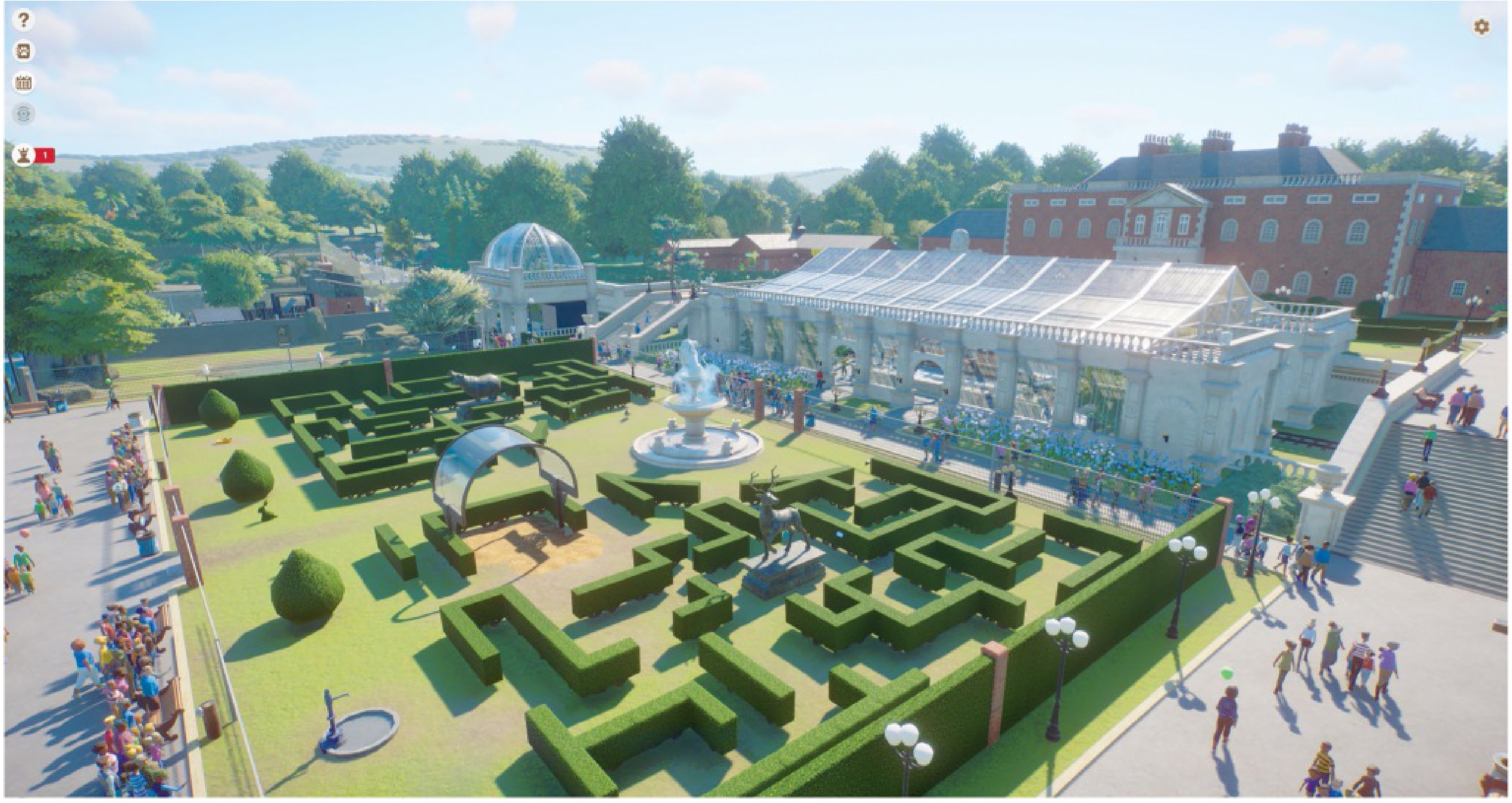
Simply, *Planet Zoo*'s animals are so good that there didn't really need to be any other game around them. The same can be said for pretty much every system in the game. The tools for reshaping terrain and laying out paths and tunnels and bridges, fiddly as they are, are so involving you sometimes forget there are animals to coo at. There's a robust resource-management element, with just the right amount of challenge to balancing the stats-on-a-graph requirements of your animals against those of your guests, your staff and our old friend capitalism. There is, honestly, an excess of game here.

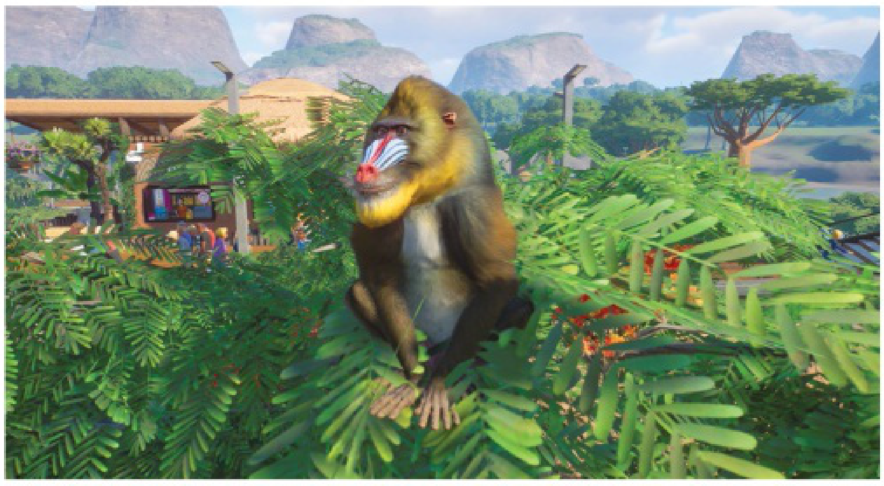
Planet Zoo feels like a game intended to be enjoyed over months, the way many of us tended to a family of Sims over entire terms of schoolnights. Evaluating it now – knowing we'll likely be gawping at other players' skill and creativity well into next year, hoping the elephant's worth of wrinkles get ironed out – feels a little like evaluating an iceberg based only on the bit of it you can see above water. For now, though, we'll settle for appreciating those moments, the ones that outlast the frustrations, where we sit back in our chair and marvel at the results of our own work. And on that basis, *Planet Zoo* is a triumph.

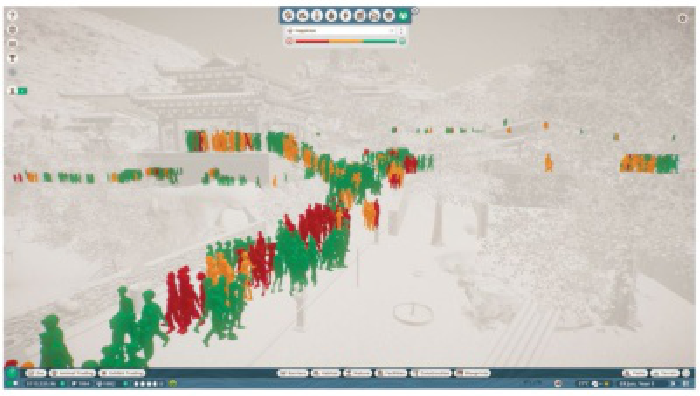
8

Planet Zoo's animals are so good that there didn't really need to be any other game around them

TIGHT SPACES
Planet Zoo offers two kinds of enclosures for your animals: the larger habitats you design by hand, and exhibits, those glass cases which hold spiders, lizards, scorpions and all the other animals we normally skip when visiting a zoo. The latter feel like the poor relation. They can be visually customised, picking colours the same way you would a toilet block or a bin, but when it comes to the welfare of their inhabitants, you're limited to ticking a box to add layers of miniature scenery, and tweaking a thermostat to control humidity and temperature. They're useful mainly as a way of boosting the variety of species in your zoo, which – come to think of it – is probably the reason real-life zoos have them in the first place. Ah, authenticity.

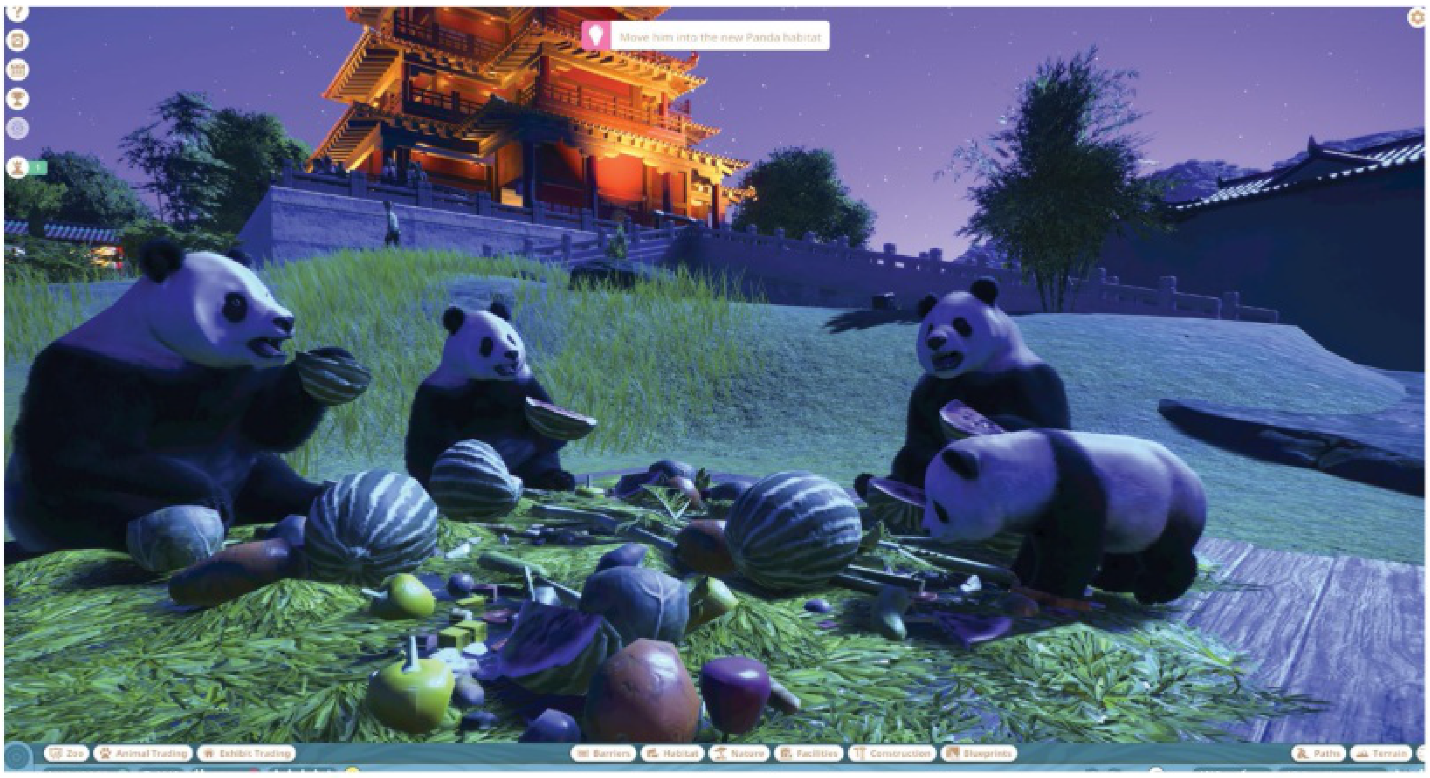






ABOVE Heat maps cover pretty much every possible aspect of zoo maintenance, from the literal temperature of your animal enclosures and housing to which zoo visitors currently need the toilet most

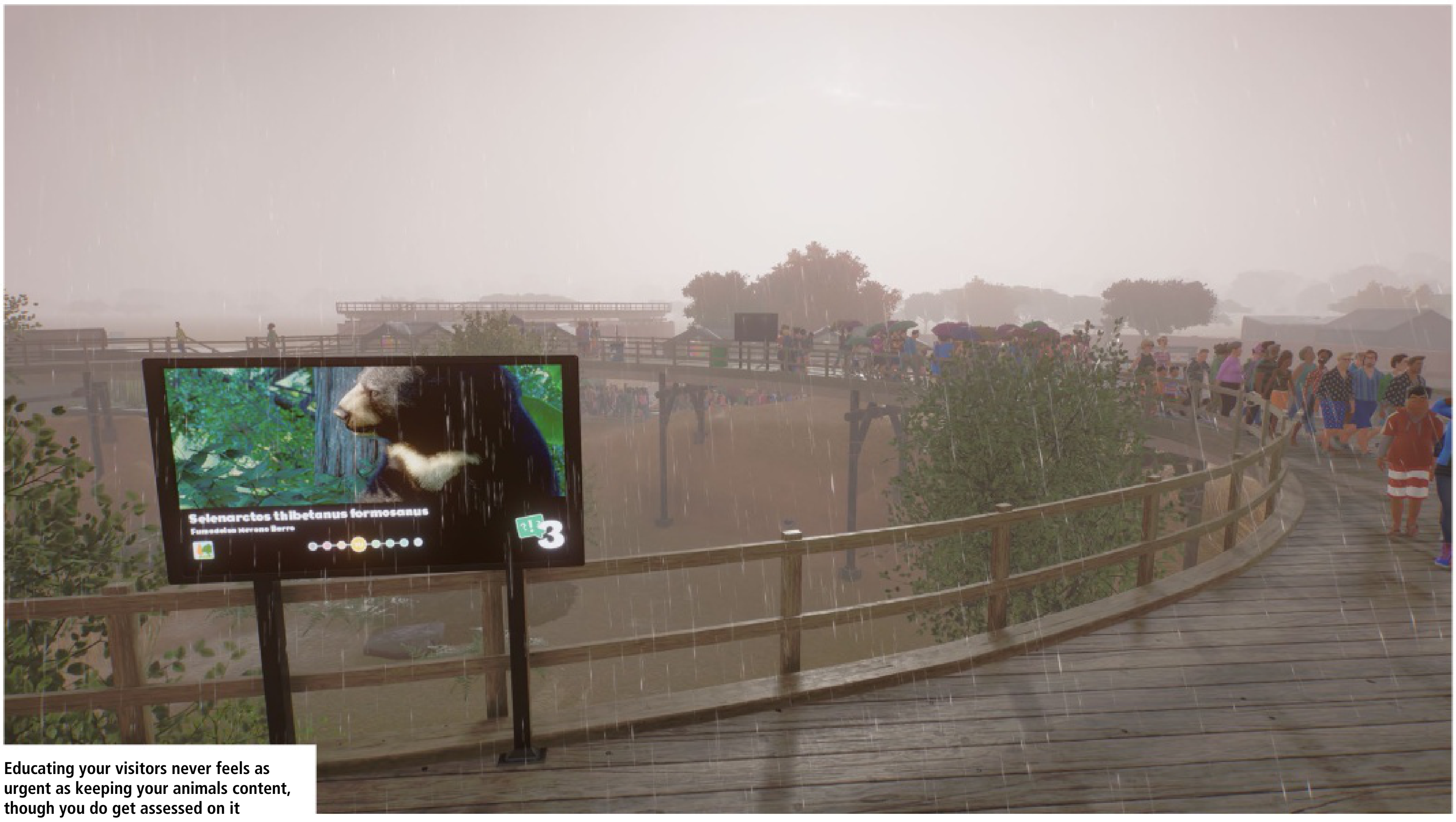
MAIN Career mode's prebuilt zoos are truly something to behold, especially once you know how fiddly they are to make.
ABOVE You can set the camera to follow animals in close-up – the odd bit of scenery clipping aside, it's like a DIY Attenborough doc.
RIGHT You can improve animals' diets by researching the species, and splashing out a little more on food quality. And really, who's going to say no to happier pandas?



Move him into the new Panda habitat

Zoo
Animal Trading
Exhibit Trading
Barriers
Habitat
Nature
Facilities
Construction
Blueprints
Paths
Terrain

▶



Educating your visitors never feels as urgent as keeping your animals content, though you do get assessed on it

Post Script

While the game focuses on the positives, there's a dark side to keeping animals captive

There's a passage early in Yann Martel's novel Life Of Pi that springs to mind every time we visit a zoo – in reality or, as it turns out, on a screen. With all its talk of boundaries and fulfilling animals' needs, the passage could almost be an – unusually colourful, admittedly – excerpt from *Planet Zoo*'s in-game manual. But the bit which sticks is Pi's argument, as he dismisses "nonsense" concerns that life in captivity suppresses an animal's freedom.

"One might even argue that if an animal could choose with intelligence, it would opt for living in a zoo," Pi says, "since the major difference between a zoo and the wild is the absence of parasites and enemies and abundance of food in the first, and their respective abundance and scarcity in the second." It's a nice thought, assuaging any tugs of guilt which might spoil the pleasure of watching animals in their artificial habitats.

Frontier is working from a similar standpoint: that zoos – modern zoos, good zoos – are a positive force in the world. As it has to, we suppose, if it wants to make this game as anything other than a misery simulator. And the studio has been clear, from the moment it first unveiled *Planet Zoo*, on what exactly makes a zoo good: a focus on education, conservation and animal welfare.

All three of these pillars figure into *Planet Zoo*'s design. Education means ensuring your guests leave with a greater appreciation for the wonders of nature, and what better way of doing that than with a laminated piece of A3 stuck on a pole? Your education score might be given prominence (along with cleanliness, it's one of two factors zoos are judged on when the inspector comes to visit) but mechanically speaking, it's pretty thin. After building and populating each new habitat, you're encouraged to add a sign and a speaker, then select the appropriate educational content and speaker volume. It feels like busywork, and the knowledge that our zoo's education rating is lagging behind everything else is rarely motivation enough to go through the motions.

Animal welfare is more successful, not least because it shifts the focus from visitors (the game's least interesting aspect, a roaming herd of wallets) to the stars of the show. Welfare is what forms the basis of your day-to-day zoo management. Fail to meet an animal's needs, in terms of space or nutrition or enrichment – meaning deployment of toys to keep it stimulated – and you'll be told off with a glaring red bar. Let the problem fester, and your animal might grow sick or die.

To drive the point home, low welfare will attract protesters. Their signs might be written in the game's Simlish-style language, but the message is clear: these are the boundaries of being a good zoo, and you have crossed them.

Ultimately, though, neither high welfare or education ratings are the main marker of success in *Planet Zoo*. It's how much you earn. Unless you're playing in Sandbox mode, your zoo is not a charity. You'll need to maintain a healthy profit margin if you want to keep building and adopting. The game's attempt to offset this rather mercenary aspect is also the way it works in the third of those pillars: Conservation Credits, a secondary currency intended to reward good deeds like releasing animals into the wild by letting you buy new (and more endangered) ones. It's a decent attempt to mechanise a concept as abstract as conservation, though it's hard not to feel like you're chasing the dollar by another name.

It's a successful incentive, though. *Planet Zoo* is good at moulding you into the kind of zookeeper Frontier wants to see in the world, but the game also allows for the bad and even ugly, as the subgenre of animal battle-royale videos on YouTube will attest. Which is probably as it should be. *Planet Zoo*'s presentation of its subject matter is hopelessly sunny, and without any acknowledgement of the darker side, the choice to try to do things right would be meaningless. ■

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Pokémon Sword & Shield

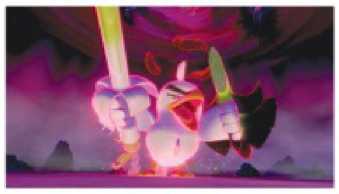
Developer Game Freak
Publisher The Pokémon Company, Nintendo
Format Switch
Release Out now

How fitting for a game set in a fictional version of Britain that the build-up to release has been dominated by endless debates about a controversial split; one which seems destined to rage on long past its due date. You could say it's an admirable commitment to its setting by Game Freak, though here it's more than 52 per cent of the national Pokédex that are leaving, and they didn't have any choice in the matter. Indeed, of the original 151, only 48 remain in their original guises, rising to 54 if we include regional variants. Other popular monsters are also absent: the first mainline Pokémon games developed for a home console will not feature Garchomp, nor Empoleon, Luxray, Blaziken, Scizor and more. We may roll our eyes at the armchair devs insisting more could have been done; that balancing 890 Pokémon would be easy; that reused assets are conclusive proof of laziness. But the series was designed to encourage players to form emotional ties with those critters, and those whose favourites have missed the cut deserve our sympathy.

In this case, however, such a seemingly brutal culling feels like a necessary evil for a series that has been constantly expanding since the beginning, its menagerie having swelled to cumbersome dimensions. By reducing the total number of monsters, Game Freak has made the Galar region's natives feel more valuable, while bringing them under closer scrutiny for those with no choice but to choose a new main. Happily, there are plenty of good ones to pick from, with British art director James Turner overseeing some of the best creature designs the series has had in generations. Take the fiery Centiskorch – part centipede, part slap bracelet – which coils up and whips forward to lash opponents. Or Grapploct, a muscular mollusc that wears one of its tentacles as a jiu-jitsu belt. Amusing and eccentric evolutions abound, too. The wonderfully weird Applin is a tiny dragon stuck inside the body of a red apple; though it's mostly useless this way, its 'hatched' form is fantastic, not to mention a surprisingly handy physical attacker. Another third-stage evolution fires its larval form as missiles from a head shaped like a stealth bomber.

All of them can now – albeit temporarily – grow to kaiju proportions. If the new Dynamax mechanic seems built for spectacle rather than strategy, its limitations (it lasts just three turns and can only be used once per battle) add a welcome wrinkle, like choosing when to activate a power play. And the visual drama shouldn't be dismissed. Gym battles now take place in spectator-packed stadiums which give these giants space to fight. Some even adopt entirely new forms, including several older monsters: Duraludon becomes a skyscraper, while Garbodor's junk pile is large enough to contain a cruise ship and a passenger plane. The new gym-leader battle theme, meanwhile, is an absolute banger, with the audience chanting along as fights enter their critical stages. These might seem like minor changes, but collectively they make each key battle feel much more of an event; from the surrounding pageantry to the shuddering explosions, they're more exciting to watch.

By reducing the total number of monsters, Game Freak has made the Galar region's natives feel more valuable



'MON-MAXING
Scattered across the Wild Area are glowing Dynamax dens. Here you'll be able to fight (and catch) powerful Pokémon alongside three other players in battles akin to *Pokémon Go*'s raids (random AI trainers fill any gaps). They're much more powerful than the Dynamax Pokémon you'll encounter in gyms, being able to nullify stat changes and deploy shields, which need to be broken before your attacks will have their usual effect. Fainted monsters will auto-revive after missing a turn, but each time this happens a gathering storm gets closer; if four Pokémon faint, you'll be swept away and forced to start again. They're worth the effort, mind: these are the only way to obtain most of those gloriously overblown Gigantamax forms.

It's a pity they're mostly a breeze, at least first time around, although it's clear Game Freak has recognised that seasoned players are keen to power through the story to get to the meat of the competitive PvP game. Experience is now shared between your party Pokémon, which eliminates the need for newcomers to get to grips with grinding. Everyone else, meanwhile, can challenge themselves by taking on tougher battles in the Wild Area, a free-roaming expanse between towns where you're finally afforded full camera control. This isn't open-world *Pokémon*, but it is a step towards it. Monsters wander around in the field and you can decide which ones to approach; you can whistle to attract them, or nudge the analogue stick to sneak by unnoticed. Others are still hidden within the tall grass, adding a welcome element of mystery as you wait to discover whether you've found something new or yet another Vanillish. As in *Xenoblade*, some are best avoided, though you won't know their level until they've engaged you; as a general rule, if they sprint your way it's wise to turn tail, or else make sure you've got a quick Pokémon at the front of your party to boost your chances of getting away unscathed. And like *Xenoblade*, some will only pop into existence when you get close. This may be the best-looking *Pokémon* game to date, its crisp, clean aesthetic scaling well in handheld mode, but a few technical shortcomings still linger.

Those are symptomatic of a game – and a series, in truth – that takes baby steps rather than giant strides forward. Sure, you'll find some welcome quality-of-life improvements. You're given an opportunity to nab a Pokémon before the catch tutorial, allowing you to skip it. There are regular auto-saves, though traditionalists and soft-resetters will be pleased to learn these can be turned off. You can – at last! – access your Pokémon boxes at any time. You'll gain access to a bike that can later be upgraded to scud across bodies of water. There are curry-making minigames and balloon-popping time trials besides. Yet on more than one occasion we reach a new area just a little too soon, and it's clear it wasn't just those Pokémon that didn't make the cut.

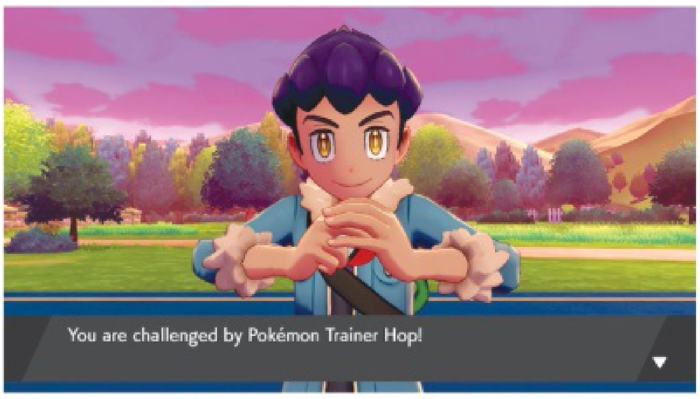
But to focus on what's missing would be to overlook the joys that remain. Game Freak's view of our corner of the world may be rose-tinted, but Galar is a picturesque, friendly delight: from its rural idylls to its inauthentically pristine cities and use of British idioms (a change as small as 'TV' to 'telly' makes a surprising difference) we feel an unfamiliar surge of pride. If only the real thing were so green and pleasant; alas, here we have no control over the monsters.

7

LEFT Sobble is patently the best starter, not least given the relative paucity of decent Water types. It eventually evolves into a suave spy Pokémon that uses finger guns to soak opponents.
MAIN Antagonists Team Yell – essentially a cross between a group of Japanese idol obsessives and rowdy football fans – aren't such a bad lot, even if their decorum leaves a little to be desired.
BOTTOM Cramorant supplies a bit of comic relief with its habit of re-emerging from Dive attacks with a Pokémon lodged in its bill – which it subsequently spits at you, causing extra damage

Team Yell

Didn't we tell you, mate?
You get in our way, and you're in for a battle!

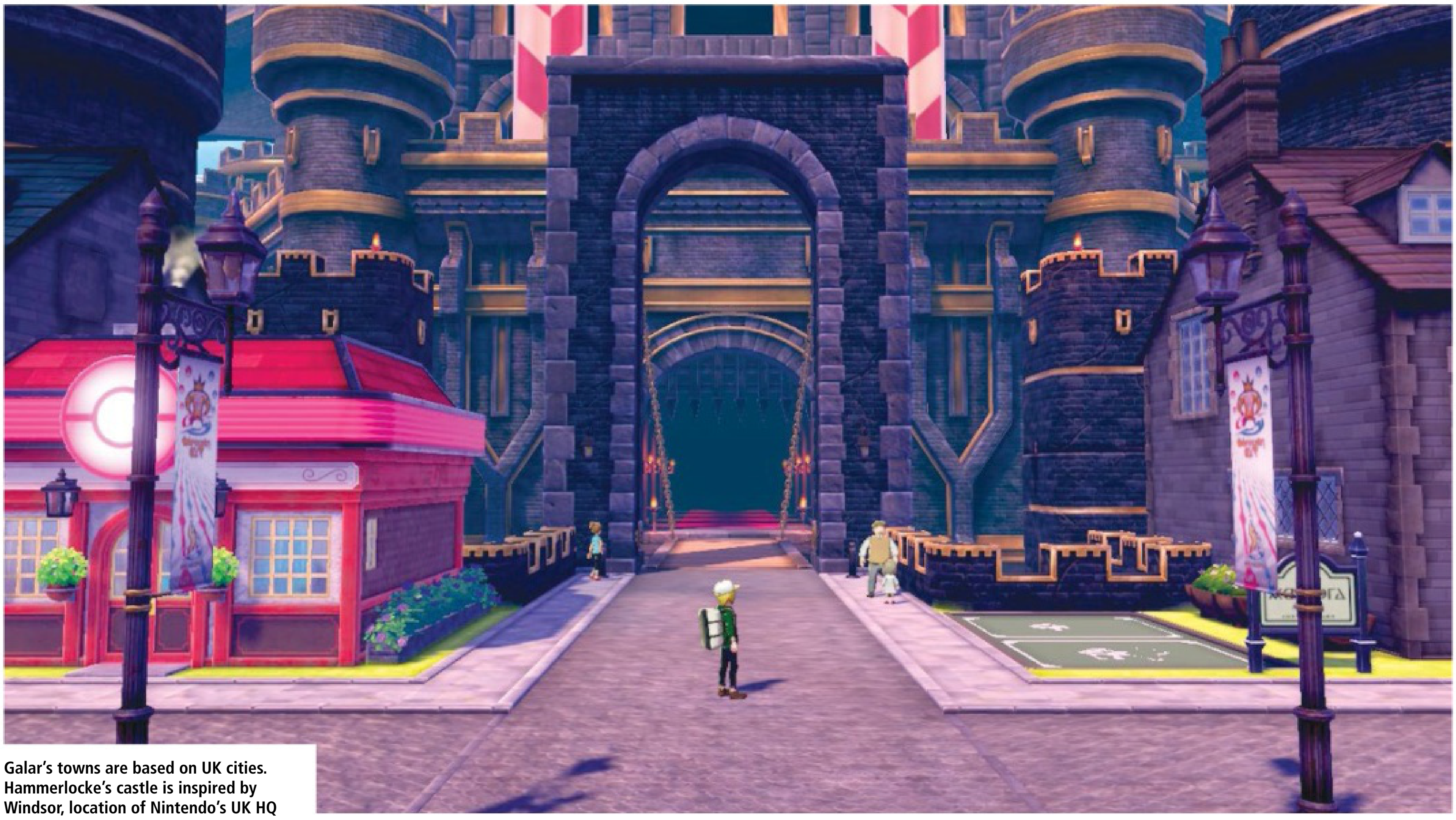


You are challenged by Pokémon Trainer Hop!

ABOVE Poor Hop: successive demolitions of our rival's team shatter his confidence in his aim to be the best there ever was. Game Freak throws him a bone in the post-game with a heartwarming resolution to his journey

Cramorant Lv. 29
Info
Fight
Pokémon
Bag
Run
Leon Lv. 33
62/90

▶



Galar's towns are based on UK cities. Hammerlocke's castle is inspired by Windsor, location of Nintendo's UK HQ

Post Script

Pokémon and 'Dexit': a very modern scandal

Last month, while surveying the past decade in videogames, we discussed the controversy surrounding *Mass Effect 3* and how Bioware and EA's response marked a tipping point for the relationship between big games and their players. Nevertheless, the vitriol that greeted Game Freak when producer Junichi Masuda revealed that *Sword & Shield* would be the first mainline *Pokémon* game not to include every monster from previous generations still came as a surprise. We thought this welcoming series – a game with broad appeal that promotes cooperation – had one of the most convivial communities in videogames. Alas, many of those players proved depressingly ready to turn upon the game's creators as soon as the bad news was announced.

In keeping with the games' UK-inspired setting, this soon became known as 'Dexit'. Others made comparisons to Marvel villain Thanos, some noting that the Avengers antagonist had been more merciful than Game Freak, since his finger snap had only wiped half the population from existence. For his part, Masuda bullishly suggests around 400 monsters will be the norm for future entries, allowing the studio to focus on other improvements, including more expressive animations – which are evident among the new additions to its more manageable roster.

Regardless, the complaints have rumbled on ever since that first eruption of invective, with a legion of 'fans' actively determined to find fault. In some cases, the allegations were unproven: one apparent datamine suggested a large number of monster models had effectively been copy-pasted from 3DS entries *Sun & Moon*, though there was no source for this. Meanwhile, early players posted selective complaints alongside GIFs highlighting the game's apparent technical shortcomings while dismissing any improvements elsewhere. The perception was that Game Freak had compromised on quantity and quality.

In truth, Game Freak had given the naysayers some ammo, with a host of cuts beyond the monsters, including 144 Pokémon moves. This was always likely to happen at some point – the series has simply grown too unwieldy to effectively balance its competitive metagame. That said, was the first mainline *Pokémon* game on home console hardware really the right time to do it? And are fans really wrong to expect a little more from one of the medium's biggest moneymakers? Not all of its visual issues can be attributed to its platform: this is a console that can (just about) run *The Witcher 3*, for heaven's sake.

Other criticisms were more a matter of taste. *Sword & Shield*'s streamlined campaign seems to have been built with competitive players in mind. Some bemoaned the absence of regional lore, while others wanted more dungeon-like areas with environmental puzzles, where encounters are frequent and an escape rope mandatory. These are legitimate grievances, though in the tumult of social media it's hard to separate them from those simply piling on for the sake of it.

That furore has been amplified by a number of specialist sites, which have taken to carrying news pieces on every controversy that kicks up enough of a stink. This comparatively recent trend only serves to tell these mobs that their opinions matter; that their voices, however shrill and misdirected, are being heard. One even ran a poll asking if Game Freak deserved criticism for reusing assets, a common development technique that rarely comes under such close scrutiny.

Sword & Shield are certainly not without flaws, though we understand enough about the vagaries of game development to know that any issues are unlikely to be exclusively the fault of the studio. Given the earning power of the series, there's a strong case to be made for Game Freak to be afforded more time and resources in future. But in the meantime, it would surely behove us all to think before pouring petrol on an already raging bonfire. ■

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Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare

Developer Infinity Ward
Publisher Activision
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Like the 2007 game of the same name, 2019's *Modern Warfare* depicts modern military conflict in uncomfortable, sometimes excruciating detail. And as we've become accustomed to from the series, it's also several distinct modes and experiences under one banner, varying wildly in atmosphere and objectives. And as well-crafted and enjoyable as many of its component parts are, it's a game that demands – almost goads – close scrutiny of its tonal choices.

However, 2019 is not 2007. In the present day, popular opinion's finger twitches precariously on a hair trigger, so featuring such close analogues to real acts of terror and placing emphasis on civilian casualties and infanticide was always going to carry risks. But 12 years on from the release of *Call Of Duty 4*, we've seen terrorism manifest as something that might, at any moment, happen on our doorstep. So as you play through *Modern Warfare*'s second campaign level, Piccadilly, and watch helplessly as dozens of civilians are gunned down in a faithful recreation of central London, you're forced to ask: why? Why did Infinity Ward feel it was important to visit this location, draw upon recent real terror attacks and give the player no agency to lessen their body count?

The answer, one suspects, is because this is what its developers think is expected from a *Modern Warfare* game. This is the series that brought us No Russian, after all: controversy is as much a core pillar of this *COD* subseries as Captain Price and killstreaks. It's possible that Infinity Ward is making a broader comment on real-world shooters as entertainment, or asking why interactive terror attacks feel so much more tasteless when they're closer to home than the usual fictionalised Middle-Eastern venues. Given the bombastic tone, Piccadilly's inclusion as a multiplayer map, and the fact that much of the campaign takes place in the fictional Middle-Eastern Urzikstan, however, that seems unlikely.

The problem is that it's every bit as finely wrought as it is crass. While you creep up the stairs to shoot women holding infants in a special-forces sting on a Camden terror cell, you're being guided through a masterclass in pacing and tension. As you wave a laser wand around in the windows of an Urzikstani high-rise and watch missiles obliterate your targets, a swell in action and spectacle sweeps you up in the moment. It's there in the silence between calculated sniper shots during Highway Of Death, and in the cacophony of the embassy assault one mission prior: an undeniable and irrepressible knack for crafting great FPS sequences.

It's an awkward dichotomy running through the very heart of *Modern Warfare*, never letting you resolve the inherent discomfort of watching civilians murdered, and equally never dissuading you from playing on deeper into Infinity Ward's salacious vision of counter-terrorism. Some elements can't be brushed under the carpet in the name of mechanical enjoyment, though, and the revisionist history of its Highway Of Death mission is one of them. The real Highway Of Death is a stretch of road between Kuwait and Iraq where US-led coalition forces carried out a widely criticised attack towards the end of the first Iraq war, killing an unknown number of surrendering troops and civilian refugees. In *Modern Warfare*, it's the scene of a Russian atrocity on the Urzikstani people, and of a CIA operative's heroics. Infinity Ward has defended the level, claiming the name is coincidental. If that's true, it only underlines the attitude at the heart of the game: Infinity Ward wants to brandish reality to give an edge to *Modern Warfare*, but it doesn't want the responsibility that comes with it.

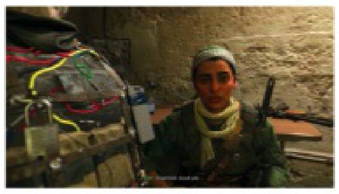
An area the studio obviously does feel responsibility towards is its competitive multiplayer, revamping the modes and the style of play to an almost unprecedented degree. The best examples of *Modern Warfare*'s new credo for online matches are its Realism playlist, where HUD elements are stripped away to markers above friendlies' heads, and the *Battlefield*-style 64-player Ground War. Taking away the radar has a huge impact on the pace of play in Realism, and forces players to slow down to a creep and check corners like seasoned *CS:GO* veterans. It does make camping too viable a strategy, though, and although there's equipment in your loadout to counter with the tactic, it isn't effective enough to deter people yet. It's early days, of course.

Played as it's intended, with a good amount of unlocks from the overhauled Gunsmith customisation system and effective team communication, Realism feels a worthwhile new avenue to pursue after years of playing team deathmatch at a perpetual sprint. Ground War, meanwhile, attempts to cross-pollinate *Battlefield*'s scale with traditional *COD*'s flair for pace and spectacle. It's largely successful, but like every other mode it's underserved by the release maps. Some, like Euphrates, seem always to favour one side, and nearly all produce predictable chokepoints. Spec Ops provides a wave-survival nicotine patch for players hankering after the absent Zombies mode and, despite offering three separate strands of PvE, feels like a stop-gap until the next instalment of *COD*'s real co-op highlight.

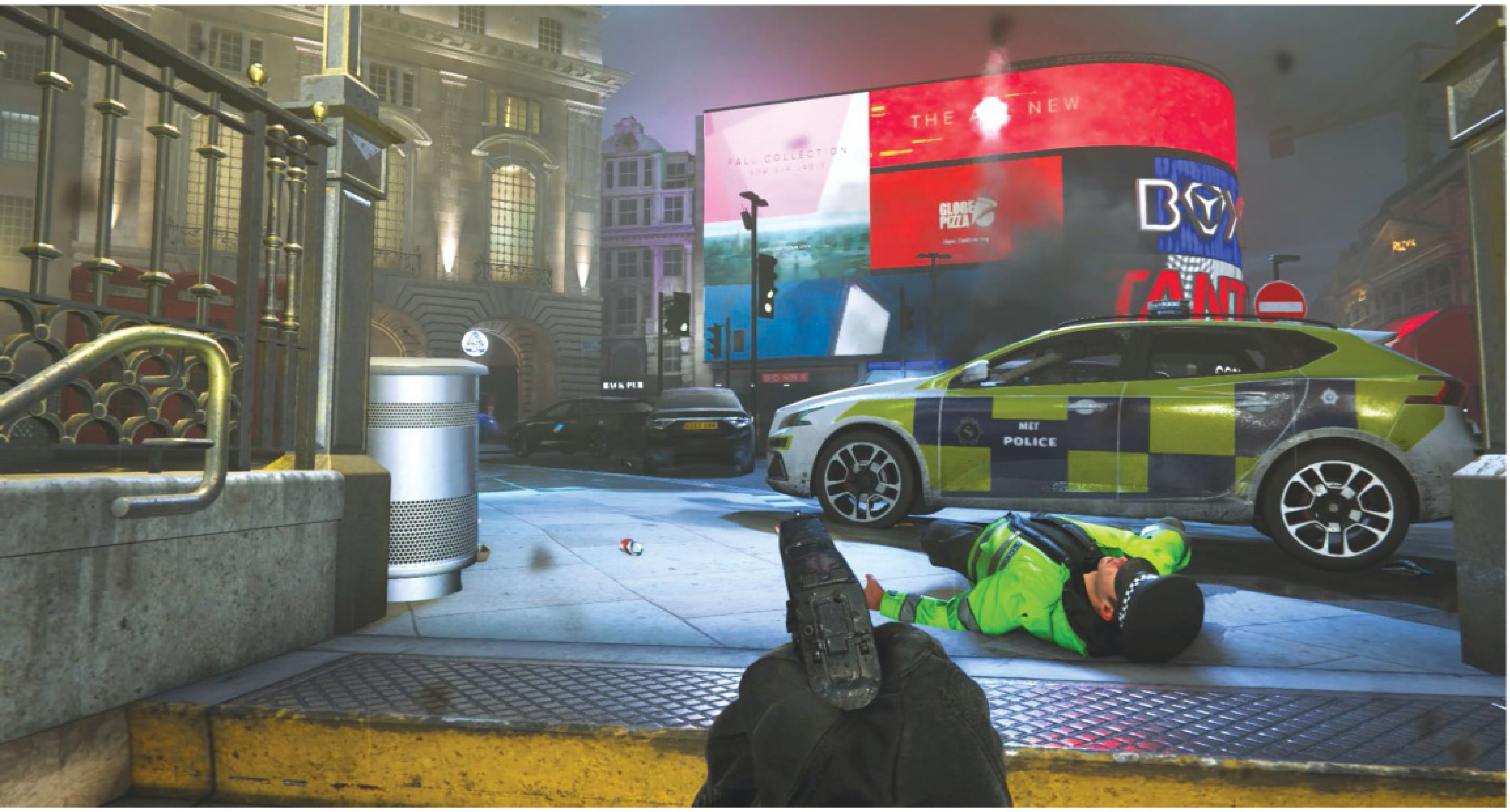
Modern Warfare is precariously balanced. On a straightforward level, its multiplayer is admirable in its reform and a touch undercooked in its execution, while the inventiveness in its six hours of campaign remind players why this became such a juggernaut name in the industry. But underneath that, there's an unease about the way *Modern Warfare* pushes the player's buttons without demonstrating respect for or responsibility to its source material. It's a conversation that will continue until the next game, when more lines are crossed, and we once again ask: how much is too much?

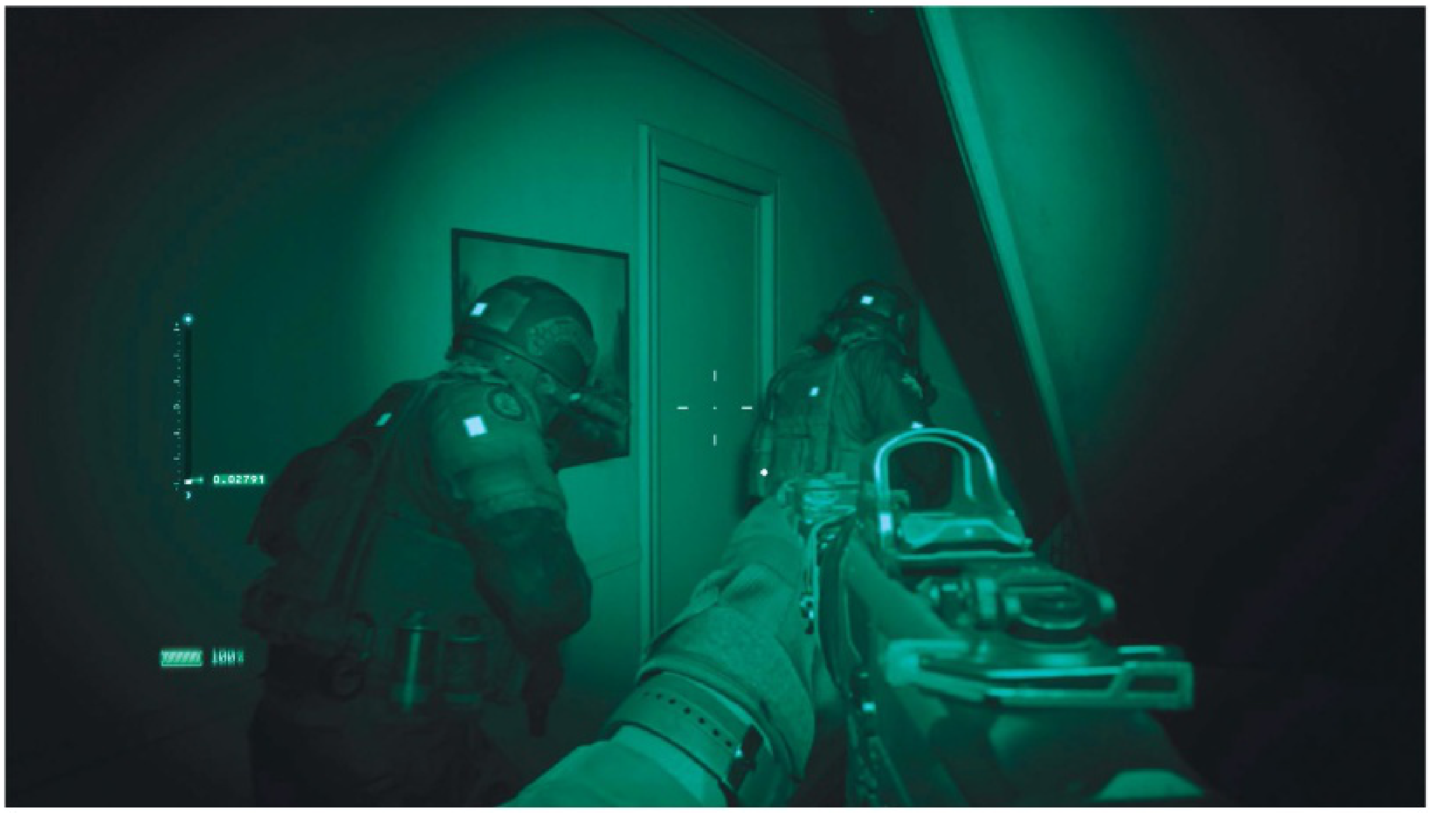
6

Controversy is as much a core pillar of this COD subseries as Captain Price and killstreaks



FREEDOM FIGHTER
Among a relatively small cast of principal characters, Farrah Karim stands out for her novelty in a *Call Of Duty* story. Raised in Urzikstan, Farrah's resourceful to a degree we rarely see in modern military shooters. Sharing protagonist duties with CIA operative Alex and SAS sergeant Kyle, she provides two highlights. One, watching a drone strike through a child's eyes and being forced into taking a life, and later escaping a Russian prison camp. The waterboarding sequence in the latter, like the jarringly gamified boss fight against a Russian agent named The Butcher, show the game's proclivity for throwing controversy at the wall in the hope some of it will come across as poignant. But in the moments in between, standout storytelling surfaces.

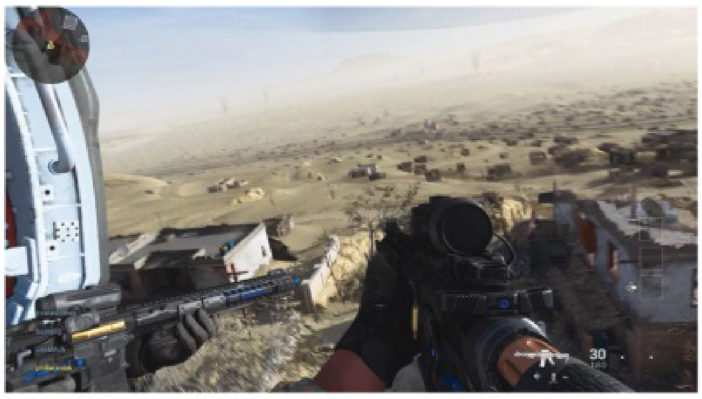




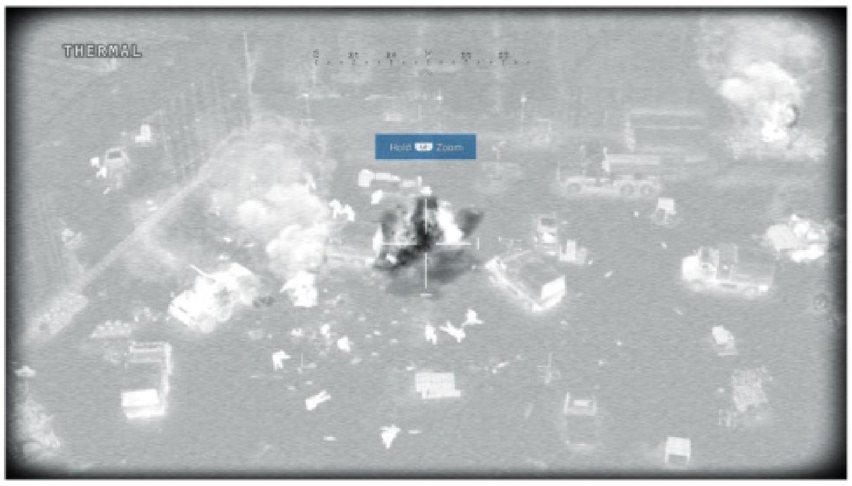
ABOVE In a game full of consecutive button-pushers, Piccadilly is among the most uncomfortable for UK audiences, all the more so for how faithfully the level rebuilds such a familiar pocket of central London.

LEFT There's an argument to be made that *Modern Warfare*'s stealthy infiltration missions could sustain an entire game in their own right. They categorically outshine the all-out assault missions

BELOW The aerial attacks which furrowed a few brows upon *Modern Warfare* 2007's release feel like palate cleansers here. The distance from all the chaos is a welcome relief, despite the slaughter you're enacting



ABOVE Spec Ops' scenario-based PvE co-op is akin to being dropped into the very end of a Zombies run – overwhelming, merciless and always featuring one player who's downed at the opposite end of the map



Monomals

Developer/publisher Picomy
Format iOS
Release Out now

Sega bright and Nintendo slick, this captivating fusion of arcade game and music sequencer from Dutch studio Picomy shouldn't work as well as it does – it is, after all, composed almost exclusively of underwater levels. You play, improbably, as a headphone-jack-cum-fishing-plug, attached to a seemingly endless line that snakes smoothly through the water as you guide it with your thumb. We're not ordinarily fans of virtual stick controls for this kind of game, but rarely do we feel the temptation to reach for our DualShock 4. For all the apparent hurdles *Monomals* has set for itself, it clears them with effortless grace.

Your goal is to collect the eponymous creatures, which lie in wait at the end of each of the seven levels that make up each world. They're a cheerful bunch, seemingly quite happy to be caught, although first you need to prove yourself worthy of their musical powers. Twist open the boss door and you're presented with two single-screen challenges that pit you against the hazards and stage gimmicks you've encountered in the levels before: you need to collect coins, defeat a group of smaller enemies, push a hard-to-reach buzzer, or stay alive for the length of a countdown under tricky conditions. Then you chase down the Monomal, plugging into its blowhole so an animal DJ can add it to their instrument collection. In the intuitive and flexible tunemaking tool, set apart from the main game, each critter can be used as lead, bass *and* percussion, since they'll produce different sounds for each.

To reach them you pass through a succession of large, colourful levels that feature a range of familiar concepts. There are platforms to tug into place and trampolines to bounce off. Boost pads carry you through strong currents, while blocks can be pushed into wall slots to unlock gates. There are trails of small coins to collect, and larger bonus tokens that are either tucked away off the critical path or secreted behind hidden walls, often requiring some deft manoeuvring to reach. This might all seem formulaic or unremarkable, but your unorthodox locomotion freshens things up. You can tap the screen with your right thumb for a short, sharp boost or hold it for a longer burst of speed. You use these to breach the surface like a spawning salmonid, pressing again for a double jump of sorts – or, when the tip of your jack is pressed against a solid surface, to wall-jump. These actions are deliberately a little awkward, adding to the vulnerability you'll feel when you're out of the water, and so pulling them off successfully is all the more gratifying.

There are new gadgets and ideas on just about every stage, and if you've seen many of them before in other games, they're pitched into levels that make the absolute most of them. In one stage you swim through cubes of jelly – any game that nods to *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat* is alright by us – with the music wobbling while you're immersed within its gelatinous mass. You slot yourself into a FLUDD-like contraption that fires jets of water, pushing you up from solid ground and filling gulleys to bring coins to the surface. You swing on grapple points and ride balloons that steadily deflate as you negotiate the gauntlets of spikes between them. Another suit lets you scuttle up walls and spring across to the opposite side at specific points. Speeding past grates that buzz with the charge from an unreachable electrical enemy is as exhilarating as a fraught escape from a spiked cylinder that rolls inexorably in from the left side of the screen, as you weave between rows of bubbles that push you back towards danger on the right. Elsewhere, you dart beneath walls that move to the beat of the music, and later wind around volume dials to temporarily mute deadly pink sound waves pumping from giant undersea speakers.

Those vibrant looks belie a challenge that is sometimes tough but – with one notable exception – exquisitely fair

MONO CHROMATIC
The music maker encourages you to mix and match Monomals, since each tune you create – the only stipulation is that it must be longer than 20 seconds – is graded, and you'll be rewarded with a higher chart position for using a wider variety of critters. Effects such as reverb and vibrato, or filters that strip out high or low frequencies, can be purchased with the coins you've collected in the main game. This gives you an incentive to explore thoroughly – and carefully, since each restart costs you ten coins, although you can replay levels to accrue the total you need. The collectable tokens in each stage, meanwhile, unlock new fixings for the three characters and their fishing boats, adding further decoration to an already bright and busy menu screen.

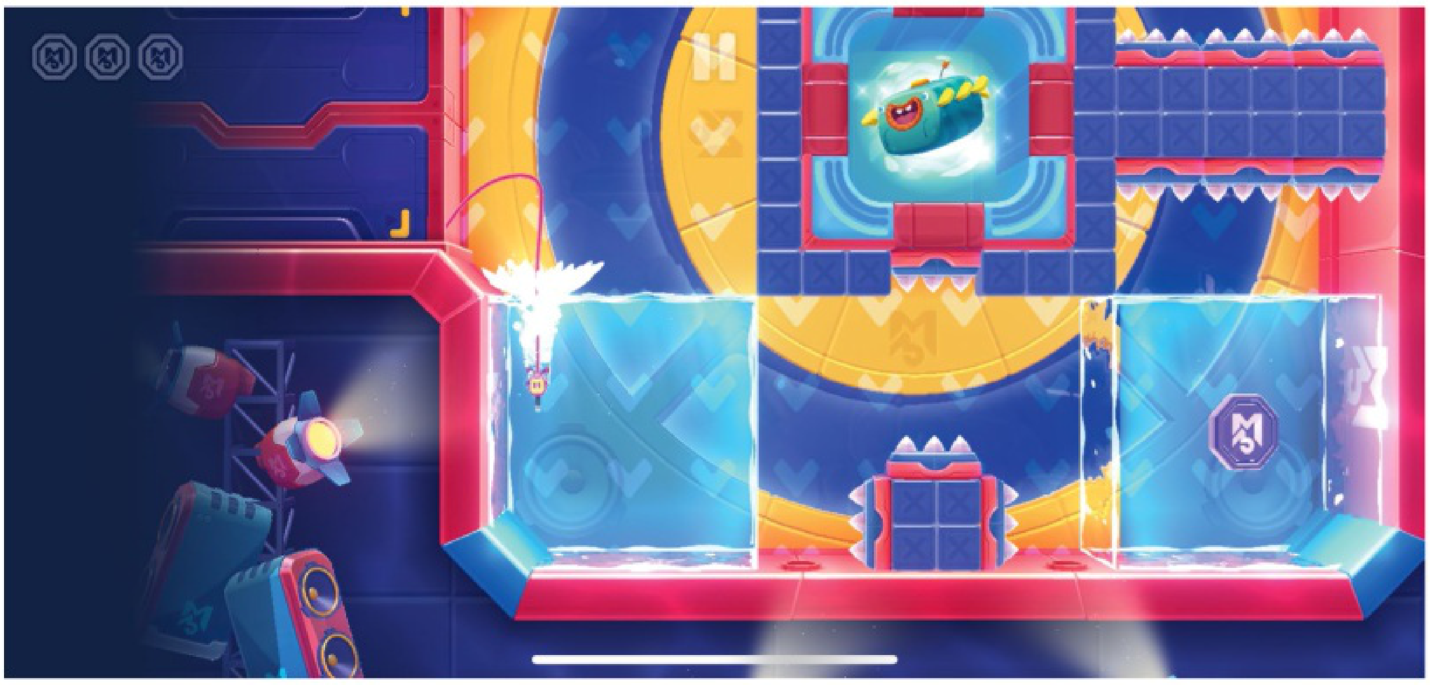
Those vibrant looks, in other words, belie a challenge that is sometimes tough but – with one notable exception – exquisitely fair. When you've been hit once, you've got an agonising wait of around ten seconds to avoid taking damage again, and though there are plenty of spots at which to rest and recover, there are just as many where you're not afforded that luxury; nor will pausing for breath help you beat the exacting (albeit optional) par times. Checkpoints are regular enough to ease any frustration, but sufficiently spaced to induce a little nervous tension, particularly during the later stages. You only need finish four levels in each of the first two worlds before you move onto the next, though some of the best moments – and Monomals – are reserved for stages five to seven in all three.

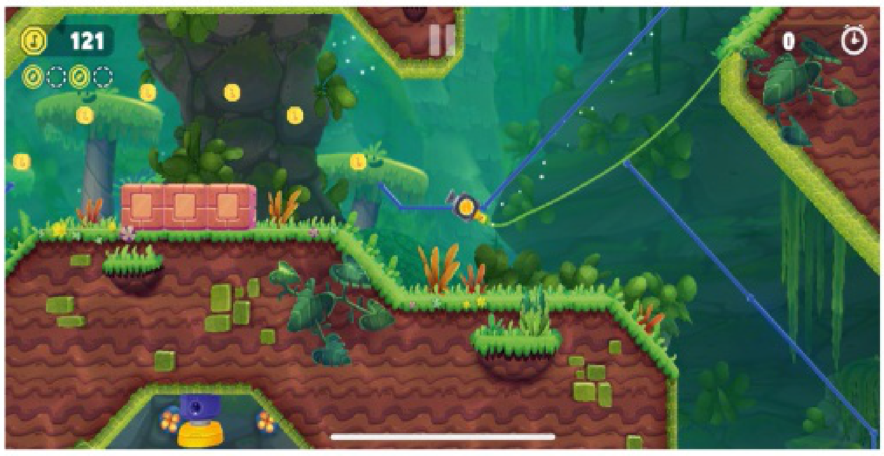
It is undeniably derivative in places, but there's real joy in seeing these platforming staples put together so beautifully. Beyond that, there's very little to complain about. Occasionally, deaths can reset you in an inopportune spot, or else restart you with a little momentum that carries you into danger. But the only real blot on Picomy's copybook comes in the back end of World 2, with an inexplicably fussy, punishing nightmare of a stage that's so out of step with the rest of the game you'd think it had been designed and coded by an entirely different team. Involving the game's clumsiest power-up in conjunction with tilting spiked platforms, rotating walls, deadly cogs and one bizarrely exacting jump, it's hard to fathom what the studio was thinking. For once, we don't return for the time trial.

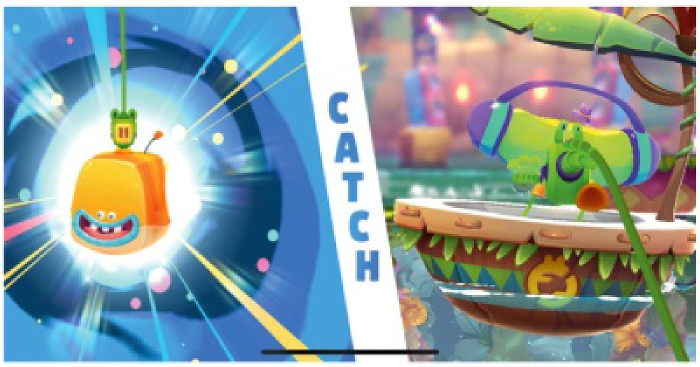
It's enough to leave a small smudge on the lustrous surface of an otherwise immaculately made game, albeit not to sour happy memories of the rest. *Monomals* is an accomplished calling card for a studio we'll be keeping an eye on. In the progressively crowded waters of Apple Arcade, Picomy's wonderfully entertaining hybrid is one catch that's well worth reeling in.

8

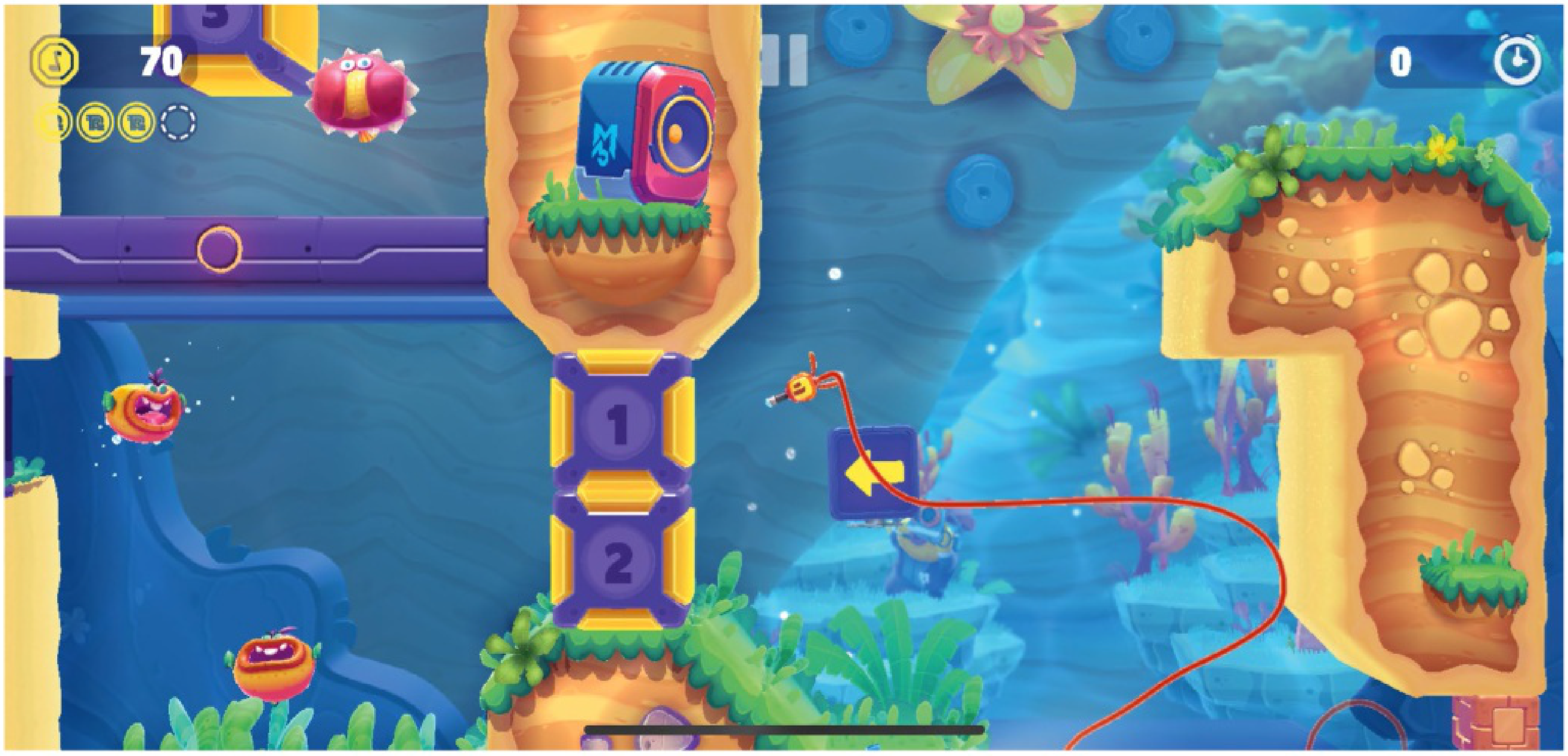
RIGHT You can listen to your own tunes instead of the preset music, as long as you've charted high enough to earn a gold disc. A future patch promises to let you share your creations with other players.
BELOW *Monomals* turns into an on-rails shooter for one stage – you need to aim your cannon at large switches to change tracks before you drop off the end.
MAIN Enemies aren't much of a threat until you've taken a hit, and then you'll need to take a little more care in dealing with them. For most, you need only boost into them once to take them out, though some are protected by spikes while others wear helmets that need to be knocked off first







ABOVE It's almost worth replaying levels for the catch animation alone, which rounds off each encounter with a Monomal with a satisfying flourish. As they say of Pokémon… well, you know the line



Manifold Garden

Developer/publisher William Chyr Studio
Format iOS, PC (tested)
Release Out now

The infinite monkey theorem holds that, given an infinite amount of time, a monkey seated at a typewriter will eventually recreate the works of Shakespeare. In *Manifold Garden*, we are the monkey. William Chyr Studio's physics-led puzzle game, seven years in the making, wields the concept of infinity with unparalleled grace. The same cannot be said of us: our initial attempts at wrapping our heads around its impossible architecture are clumsy, and slow. But *Manifold Garden* is a space composed of endless patience, where second chances come around, and around, and around.

Early on, the game gets one of its own from us. It has to be the most underwhelming opener we've seen in a while: we're trapped in cold glass-and-concrete corridors, and told to place coloured cubes (plucked from curious trees) on their corresponding switches to open doors and progress. The main wrinkle is that we're able to shift gravity – each of the six directions is assigned its own colour of the rainbow, the world tinting surfaces to help keep us oriented – to walk on walls and reach otherwise inaccessible places. Videogames being what they are, dancing on the ceiling is not exactly a revolutionary concept nowadays. And, as we progress through chamber after sterile chamber of pedestrian block puzzles, we begin to wonder whether the world outside the windows is merely set dressing. We glimpse geometric castles in the sky, and long to explore them; once we are finally released from the tedium of stacking cubes on top of cubes, we realise we already are.

From the outside looking in, it's suddenly clear that the structures floating around us are identical to the one we've just puzzled our way through. It's not obvious what this really means until we try, and fail, to climb a never-ending staircase – then, to our horror, accidentally fall off the side into the blinding white void below. And keep falling. Soon, it clicks that we can move through the air to land on another part of the same structure. It doesn't take long before the edges of *Manifold Garden*'s buildings start looking less like death and more like diving boards. There are no ends in infinity. This shift in thinking – most often prompted by the wide-open spaces outside the puzzle chambers – is the real magic of *Manifold Garden*, which puts down roots and unfurls alongside its areas, and the world-trees that we plant at the close of each of them.

The puzzles themselves are gently taxing: all are based around cubes and switches. Most cubes align with only a single colour-slash-gravity, and lock into place when you shift to another perspective; much of the challenge in many puzzles is figuring out how to move one to your desired position, often using different colour blocks as platforms to hold them in place, or working out how to make efficient use of blocks that obey more than one gravitational pull. But variations on these simple, rather lifeless themes often delight. In one section, water cascades down between the branches of a tree and across the floor; cubes inscribed with arrows can be rotated to change its flow, redirecting it to water mills and to grow new trees that sprout more cubes. In another, rotating the world's gravity is our means of solving a gigantic three-dimensional maze at the centre of it. Then there's the one we hear coming before we see it – ominous, rumbling thuds, as if a giant is stomping around outside of the poky hallway we're working our way through. To tell you what we see when we step outside once more would be to rob you of one of *Manifold Garden*'s many moments of awe.

There are no 'game over's, only a zen-like cycle until you are enlightened enough to progress beyond it

CHIME IN
Manifold Garden is visually spectacular, but it's no slouch on the audio side either. Sound designer Martin Kvale has lent his talents to many well-known indie games (*Teslagrad*, *Owlboy*, *Hidden Folks*, *Manual Samuel* and *Bad North* among them) and helps imbue the garden with its hair-raising ambience. Much of this has to do with absolute silence, which makes the dull thunk of a block falling to the ground much more significant. Then there's the cosmic wind whipping by as you fall into nothingness; the ominous hums as you peer up at infinite chasms of architecture. Finally there are the cataclysmic rainstorms that herald the end of an area which, thanks to a perfect marriage of sound and visual design, never fail to inspire goosebumps.

Indeed, the garden's al fresco audiovisual splendour is perhaps the main motivator to persevere through block-on-switch puzzle sections contained in blank, grey cells. The thinking is doubtless to teach players the fundamentals of each new law of physics in neutral spaces, before unleashing them on souped-up versions in the free-flying world outside. But almost all of these preceding sections feel overlong. The longer we play, the more naturally we find ourselves picking up the unorthodox rules of *Manifold Garden* – and still the game insists we do our homework before we're allowed to play outside. This is not a long game, but the pacing has gone awry. So, too, has some of the signposting: in a world designed to trick the eye and mind, it's perhaps inevitable. Sometimes we catch ourselves walking a looping corridor designed to force us to look elsewhere; we ignore a similarly endless-looking set of stairs later, only to eventually discover that it's simply a lengthy staircase, and that our objective is at the top of it.

At least we could never attribute the pacing issues to those long walks. The act of moving through *Manifold Garden* is its most spellbinding feature, as we marvel at its scenery while glide-sprinting across its surfaces, flipping between them on a whim, leaping into the abyss just for the view, only to land exactly where we started. When this combines with and elevates its basic puzzle elements, the effect is magical. But even when it doesn't, there is something about being in this place. We feel *held* by *Manifold Garden*. There are no 'game over's, only a zen-like cycle until you are enlightened enough to progress beyond it. Chyr's creation feels strangely real, as trees flourish under your care, and birds swoop through eternally repeating cathedrals. What could have been a nightmare is instead a beautiful meditation on the human brain, nature, mathematics, time, space and creation. The puzzle cubes, we find out early on, are more like seeds. And, as time passes in the garden, our monkey-brain turns inevitably to Shakespeare: to Hamlet, and his musing on humanity. What a piece of work is man, *Manifold Garden* seems to say – and yet, a quintessence of dust.

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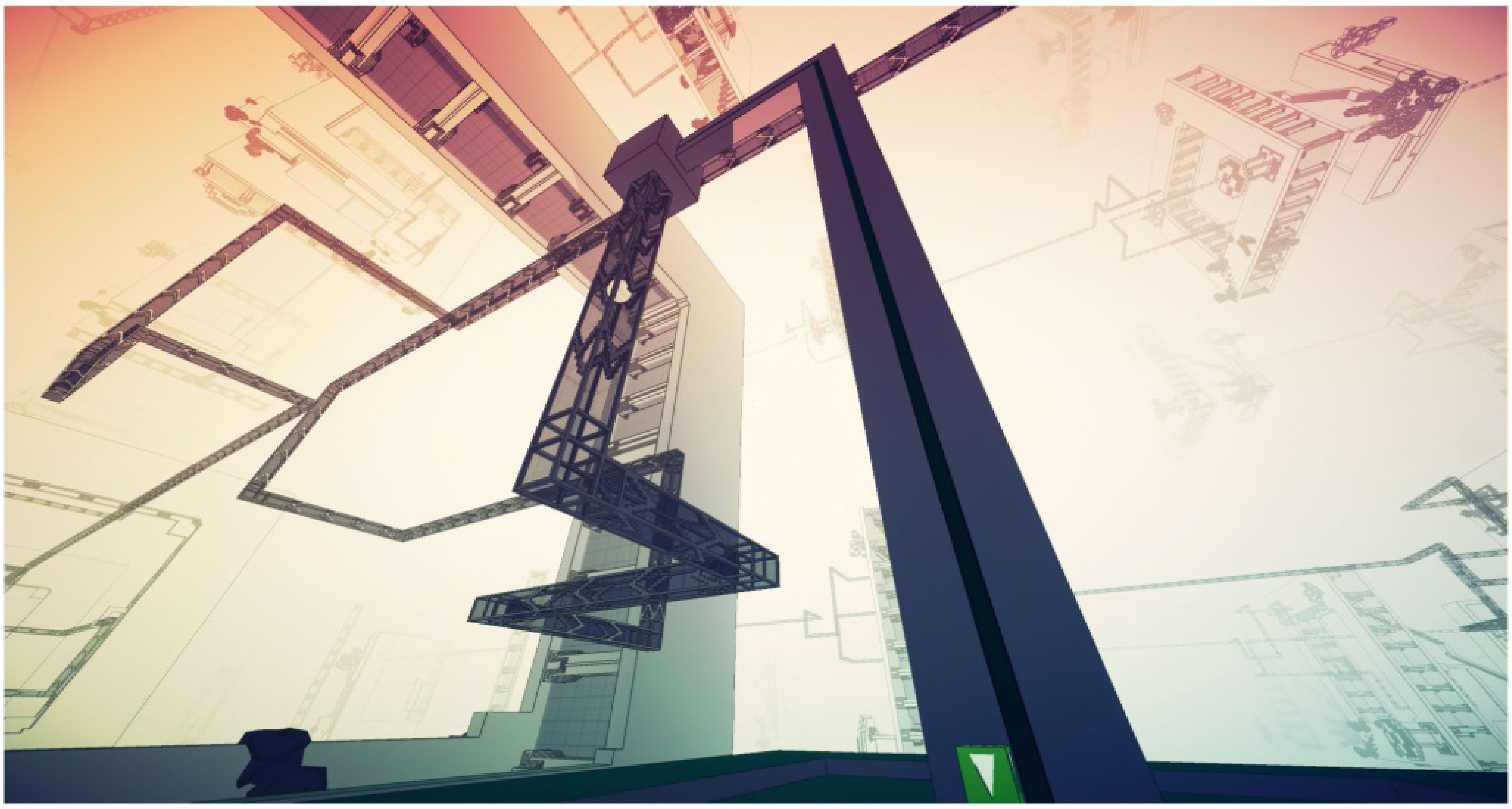
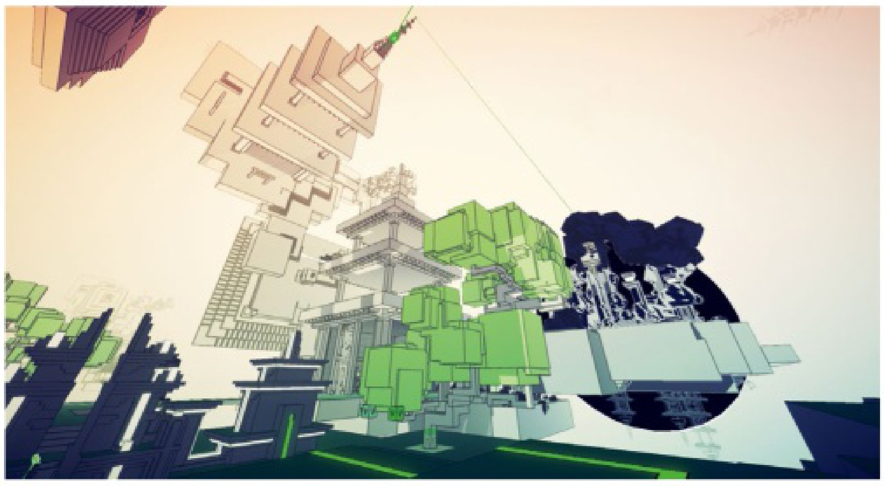
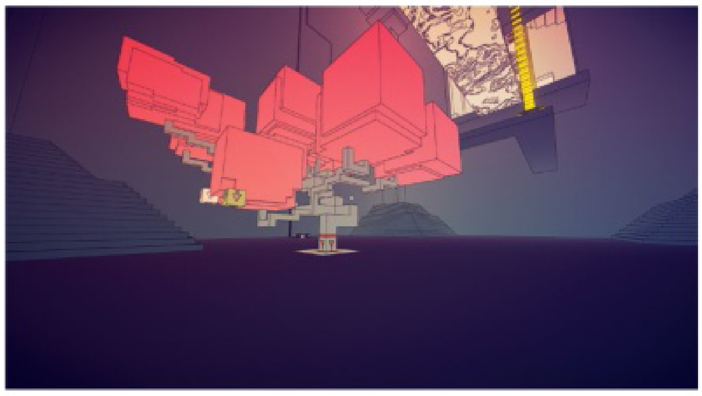
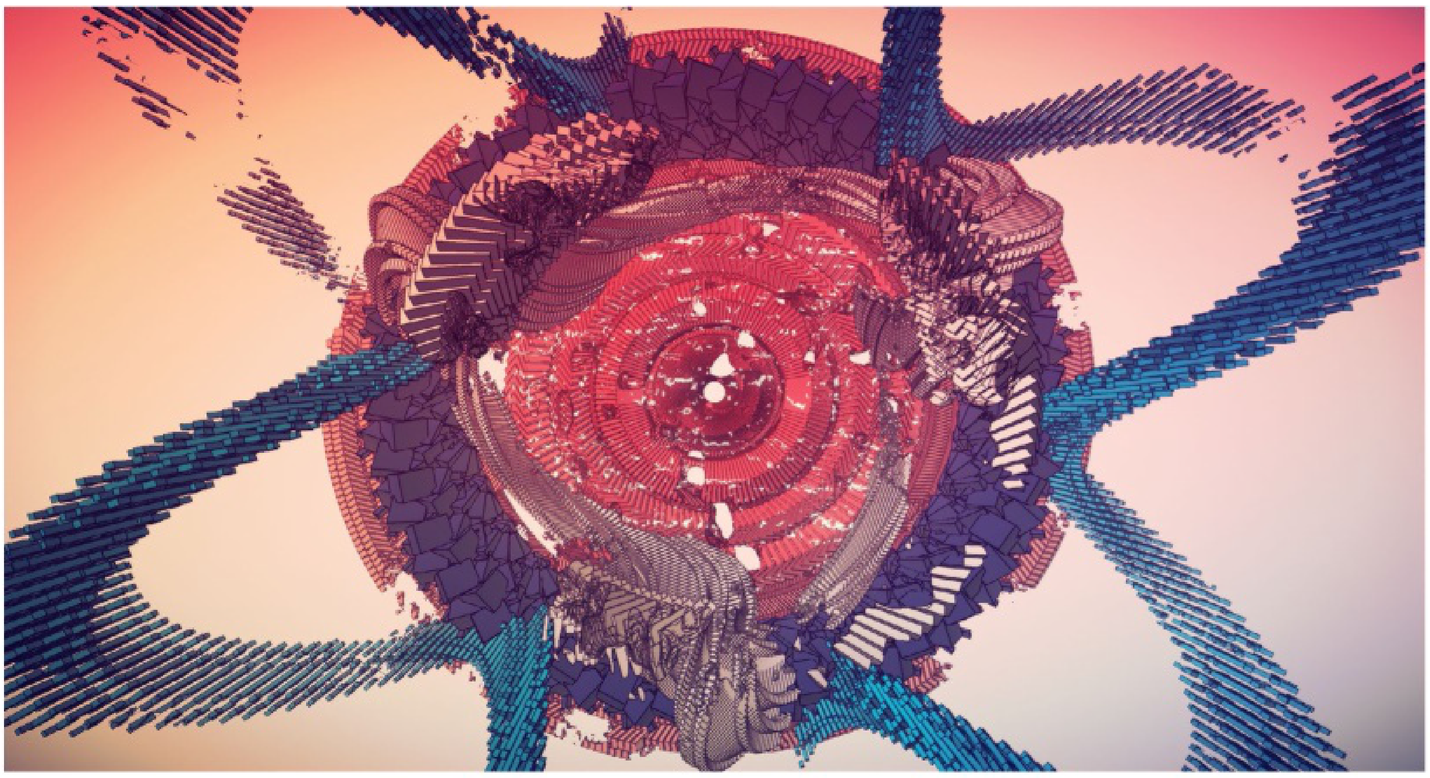






ABOVE The best levels combine the bizarre world-wrapping with new puzzle mechanics to mind-bending effect. Here, you must walk around a small, repeating level to change cubes' colours in anti-gravity beams

MAIN In outdoor levels, you're visibly surrounded by repeating versions of the area. It's stunning to behold, but we soon realise the practical benefit this offers – of being able to get a different angle on a large-scale puzzle.
ABOVE There are definitely whispers of *The Witness* here. Although *Manifold Garden* isn't as inventive with its puzzle concepts, its living elements make it feel friendlier, somehow.
RIGHT What happens as you plant the dark box-seed at the end of a level isn't ever overtly explained, but the resulting visual explosion implies the creation of a new world



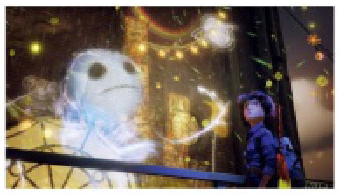
Concrete Genie

We can't say we miss being teenagers. Quite apart from all the acne and bad haircuts, there's the niggling existential problem of not really knowing who you are yet. *Concrete Genie* tells the story of a struggling teen, and fittingly enough, it crackles with potential, but hasn't quite figured out what it wants to be.

Ash is an artistic kid; on the run from bullies one day, he finds a magical brush that brings whatever he paints to life. It's also able to clear "darkness", a purple mould (caused by negative emotions) spreading across Denska. Oh, and the fishing village is also suffering from a recent oil spill, which has caused a mass exodus.

There's a lot going on, then, even before we get stuck into the painting mechanic. Imagination made dancing, glittering reality, it is the star attraction. We use the DualShock's motion controls to draw fir trees on walls, and dab butterflies across dilapidated signage (we collect different elements as we platform across rooftops to snatch up Ash's escaped sketchbook pages). Most of the time we paint these living murals to light up strings of bulbs to progress. Sometimes, they're custom-made to please our genie companions, thereby charging our darkness-clearing Super Paint ability.

Developer Pixelopus
Publisher SIE
Format PS4
Release Out now



A LONG SHADOW

Concrete Genie's tale of companionship in the face of darkness feels very much inspired by Team Ico's works. The genies often recall *The Last Guardian*'s creature Trico, at once cute and slightly creepy (and sometimes ignoring your calling them over to a puzzle, preferring instead to bat at butterflies). Perhaps the most obvious reference, however, is to *Shadow Of The Colossus*: during the section where you chase down infected genies, Ash can hold his paintbrush aloft to have a beam of light shine in the direction of a genie, in a near-perfect recreation of Wander's sword.

The genies, who follow us around on the walls like two-dimensional puppies with far too many legs, are creations of ours too. Fire, electric or wind types, they help move obstacles or connect circuits in basic environmental puzzles. But they feel like far more than glorified doorkeys: not only can we customise them using horns, tails and other accessories, we can play basketball and peek-a-boo with them, tickle them with our brush and watch them eat painted apples.

Which makes it all the more disturbing when we're told to beat the snot out of them. In an unexpected – and unwelcome – twist, about two-thirds of the way in *Concrete Genie* turns from creative creature-charmer into generic action brawler. As genies become infected with darkness and escape the walls, we're told to "attack" them with our brush until their health bars deplete. There's nothing here that couldn't have been achieved with inventive use of the painting mechanic (indeed, Pixelopus redeems itself slightly by returning to it for the final showdown). Violence is violence, no matter how many butterflies you stick on it, and presenting it as the way to solve conflict in an anti-bullying game feels almost offensively incongruous. Whether this tonal shift originated from inside the studio, or from forces that it couldn't stand up to, one thing is certain: *Concrete Genie*'s identity crisis proves its creators still have some maturing left to do.

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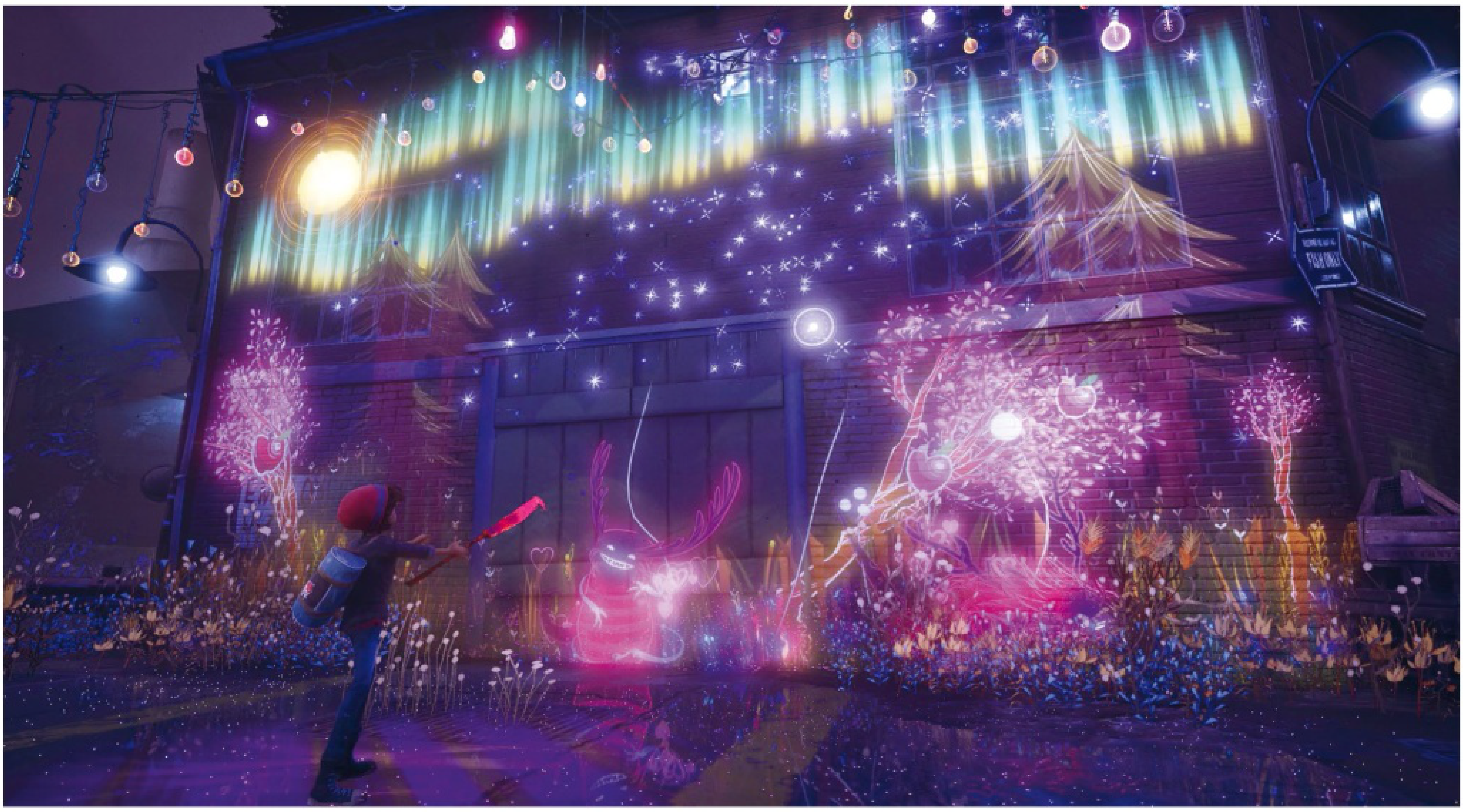
Concrete Genie **knows its strengths, and plays to them quickly: within half an hour of playing, we've unlocked both Free Paint mode and a basic but intuitive photo mode that lets us frame the gorgeous visuals perfectly**



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Superliminal

Developer/publisher Pillow Castle
Format PC
Release Out now

Only a few minutes into Pillow Castle's crafty firstperson puzzler, we're reminded of Father Ted explaining perspective to a bewildered Dougal: "These are small, but the ones out there are far away." In *Superliminal*, they can be both – or at least one and then the other. By grabbing and moving objects, their dimensions will change: tiny knick-knacks will come to dwarf you, while larger items can be shrunk to squeeze into narrow spaces. You'll hold the moon in your palm, spinning it around to reveal the way ahead, and transform a piece of waxy cheese into a giant ramp up to an exit close to ceiling level. Its perception-is-reality theme may not be entirely new, but the likes of *Echochrome* and *Monument Valley* never made such consistently cunning and playful use of the idea.

While solving puzzles within these dreamscapes is often about deceiving your own eyes, just as often you're the one being fooled. There are mischievous reveals and startling optical illusions throughout *Superliminal*'s two-hour story. A marbled die splits into two when grabbed; an exit at the end of a long corridor turns out to be a protrusion; a giant chess piece at the end of a corridor transforms on approach to an artwork that spills out across the floor. Elsewhere, you'll line up incomplete shapes with distant patterns to produce grabbable three-dimensional objects. Lift something up and you might remove a chunk of wall with it, or discover that the way out is down, not forward.

It's dizzying stuff, a fever dream that's only a short hop away from a nightmare – and *Superliminal* duly takes that leap, brilliantly recontextualising everyday objects to unsettling ends. If some spaces seem particularly confounding, you're usually offered subtle visual clues to nudge you forward. To negotiate a shadowy passage, it makes sense to seek out an unconventional light source, while another room lines its walls with a sky painting: your cue to look up. It only stumbles when you find yourself scanning every corner until your reticule transforms into a hand, letting you know you've found the single interactive object that will help you progress. The placement of puzzles can feel arbitrary, too, though you could argue that the randomness is thematically appropriate: since when have dreams made perfect sense?

Even as you're pulled into ever more abstract realms, your curiosity is stoked, through to a sprint finish that offers *Superliminal*'s most thoughtful narrative moment. It spits you out, head spinning, with a message about overcoming failure through unorthodox thinking; one last surprise in a game that encourages you to readjust your perspective in every sense.

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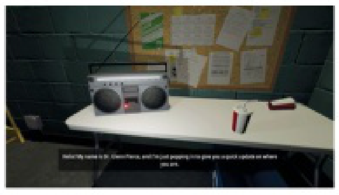
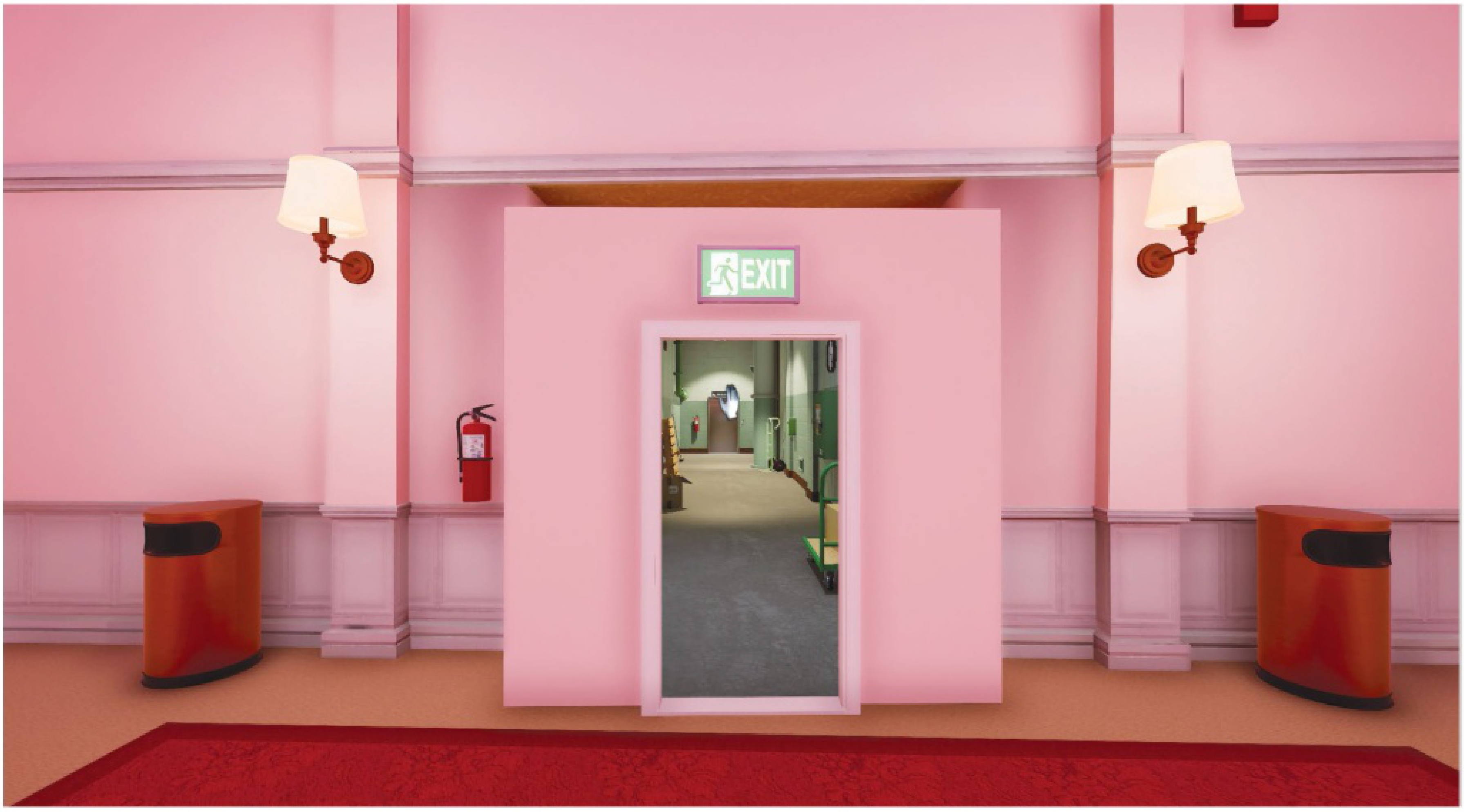


DOCTOR SLEEP

Superliminal's narrative folds in elements of Inception and *Portal* – this is, essentially, a session of dream therapy gone awry, as you descend through layers of your subconscious. Along the way you find radio messages from a kindly doctor whose bedside manner leaves something to be desired: in attempting to pacify you, he often lets on that he's no idea how to bring you back. It's gently amusing stuff, if hardly Valve standard – though it certainly sticks the landing.



There's a crisply clinical feel to the environments that makes them all the more uncanny. You'll feel like Alice plunging down the rabbit hole, especially when you find yourself resizing exits to fit through them

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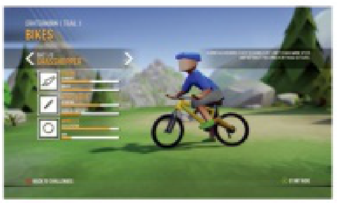
Lonely Mountains: Downhill

Developer Megagon Industries
Publisher Thunderful
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

When we experience nature in games, usually we do so at walking pace. In self-styled meditative titles such as *Proteus* (which, in a universe without Steam, would live in a corner of the shop occupied only by furtive enthusiasts, like a record shop's jazz section) it's as though the developers have you by the wrist, forcing you not to rush past the lovely shrub textures they laboured over. *Lonely Mountains: Downhill* feels like a direct response to that pedestrian pacing. It's challenging – fiercely so, actually – but ultimately the task of weaving a wobbly mountain bike along a downhill trail exists to put you in a quiet place of woodland sounds. This is meditation at sprinting pace.

Indeed, it's the sound that proves so striking. Rarely has the act of riding a bike in games been accompanied by anything other than skate punk, but here the soundtrack is provided by wind rushing through autumn leaves, birdsong and the occasional thrum of rainfall. This is an overlooked aspect of the real activity too: the startling quietness of propelling yourself through nature, a rear derailleur and some heavy breathing the only things puncturing total silence. That peaceful audio helps to settle your mind on the fiddly endeavour of navigating a bike down a hill, but it works the other way, too: while you focus on the particulars of riding its four mountain trails, you can't help but absorb the peaceful atmosphere.

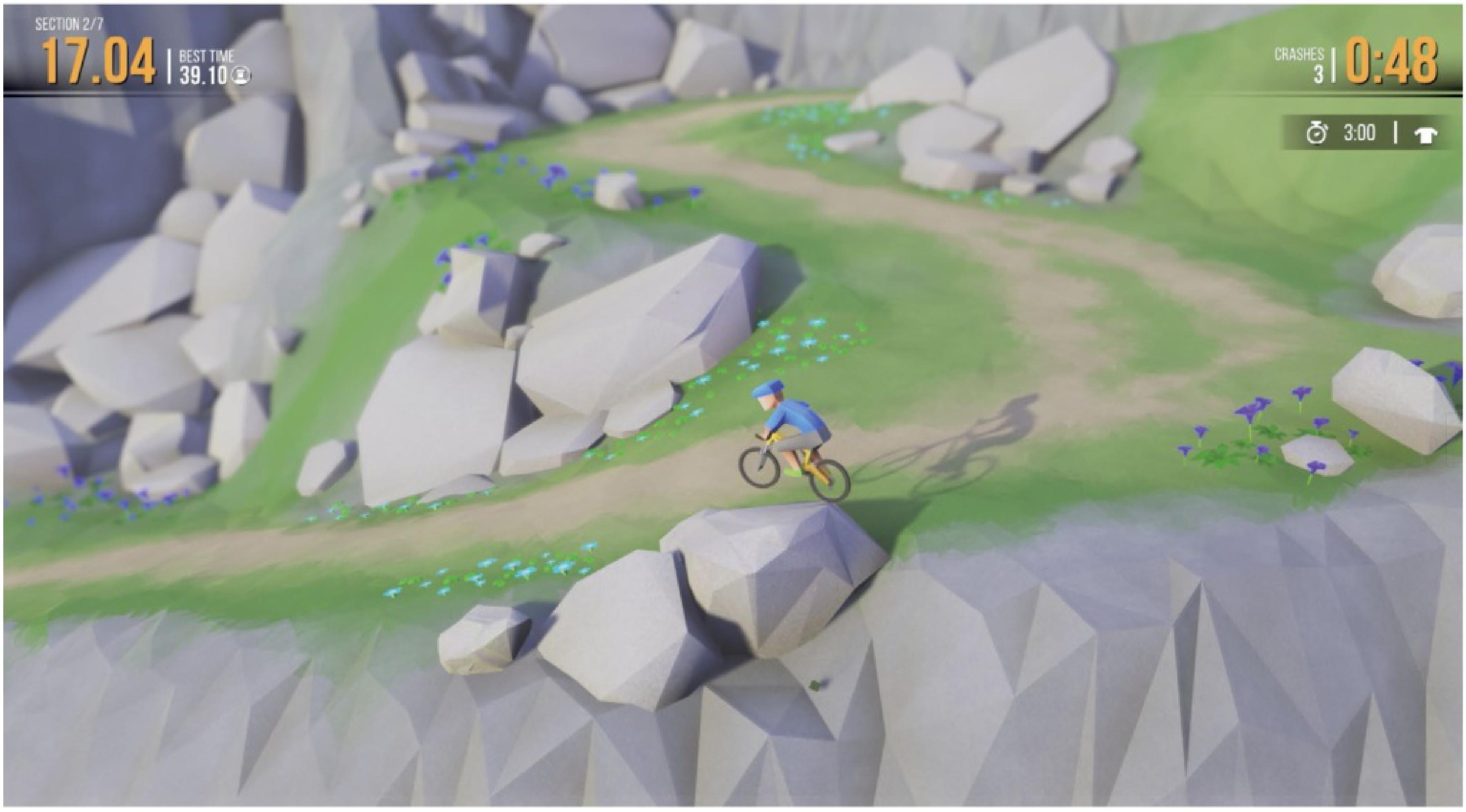


POLY GONE
The low-poly look Megagon Industries has arrived at captures the essence of its environments with just a few virtual brushstrokes. While the topography's laid out quite clearly so that there's no guesswork in navigating it, a lot of the natural beauty is inferred. You become active in filling in the details, taking cues from the soundscape to imagine a forest where just a few neat trees stand.

At least, that's the eventual result. In the hour or so it takes to get a firm grasp on its controls, Megagon Industries' zen racer occasionally tips you over into outright frustration. As runs play out in 2.5D, the camera perspective often shifts to flip the controls and force your brain into rapid recalibration. When you get it wrong, *Lonely Mountains'* rider suffers a *Trials*-like demise of blood and limp bones, which comes as a bit of a surprise given the erstwhile tranquil vibes. And you get it wrong a lot. One of the very first challenges, for example, is to make it down the mountain with fewer than 22 restarts. And that's not being generous – achieving a run of only 21 bone-demolishing bike crashes takes practice.

The two opposing forces – one asking you to smell the flowers and feel the breeze, the other demanding a samurai's dedication to the course – eventually work in harmony. But it takes a level of persistence that many won't be inclined to reach. Those people would be within their rights to quit to desktop when the cheery nature bike game breaks their legs for the 50th time – although we suggest anyone afraid of a bit of risk steer clear of the jazz section in future.

7



As the perspective twists around the mountain, so do your controls. Two schemes are offered – from your perspective, or the rider's – but they both require visuospatial gymnastics. Accidents will definitely happen

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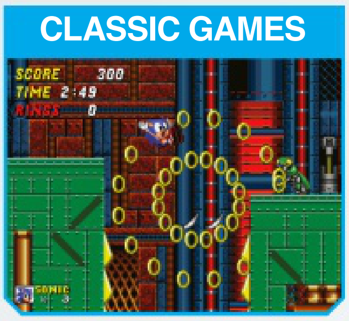

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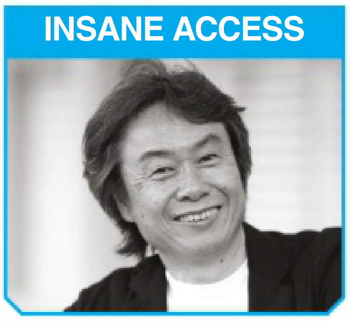

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Mosaic

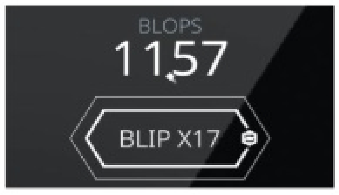
Developer Krillbite Studio
Publisher Raw Fury
Format iOS (tested), PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now

We'll give Krillbite's latest this: it starts very promisingly. As soft sunlight filters through the blinds of a nondescript room, you use your thumb or finger to physically lift your avatar, a sad-faced office drone, to an upright position on his bed. You can have him slap himself across the face – repeating this several times if you're into the whole self-flagellation thing – though you'll want to turn his annoying phone alarm off pretty quickly. Then you can drag him into the bathroom to smooth down his hair, straighten his tie and brush his teeth before it's time to head out to work. It's an effective shorthand for a colourless, miserable existence, but *Mosaic* really wants you to *feel* that grinding tedium. And so, over five days that sometimes feel as if they're playing out in realtime, we follow this poor fellow through his truly abject working life.

We feel sympathy for our gaunt, gangly avatar, if only for the sheer number of indignities heaped upon him. Every day he enters a lift, flanked by the same man and woman, who turn away in disgust should he dare to glance sideways. Red reminder bills and takeaway cartons pile up on his kitchen table. Daily text messages offer 'friendly' reminders that he's out of a job if he continues to show up late; these seem particularly cruel since there's no way to make it on time. A dating app offers an obvious but welcome flash of dark humour, as your likes stay on zero and the dislikes keep climbing until you look away from your phone. There are ways to rebel against routine, most of which involve simply walking in a different direction to the many other faceless commuters. Here, we're taken into trite flights of fancy as a brief respite from the drudgery.

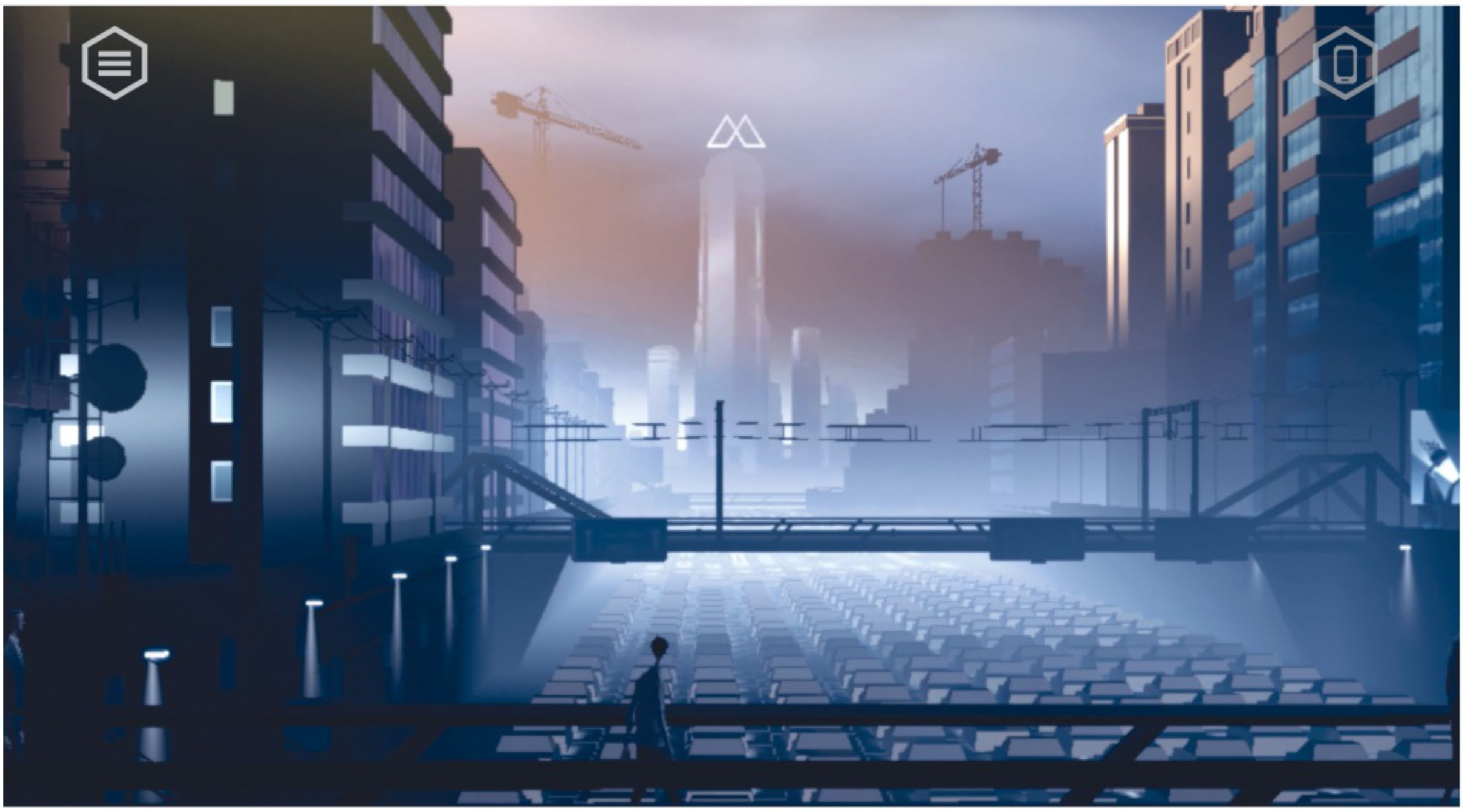
And drudgery it is: his job, which involves an awful lot of dragging and tapping to direct 'resources' to an ever more distant 'milestone', gets steadily more arduous, with brightly-coloured anomalies delaying your progress. It's symptomatic of a game that constantly draws things out: the ominous music that plays as you bend slowly to spit out your toothpaste is suspenseful the first time, but by the fifth day it feels like Krillbite is taking the Mickey. Despite some arresting images, the visual language is inconsistent, and the controls occasionally so comically unresponsive that you're never entirely sure whether a cinematic is still running, or your avatar has simply given up the ghost. And who would blame him? If the intent was to make us reconsider our career choices, *Mosaic* is undeniably effective. Unfortunately for Krillbite, before we smash the system and quit our nine-to-fives forever, we still have a job to do.

3



COD BLOPS

Should you fancy a diversion from the awfulness of life as a spoke in the corporate wheel, you can idle away some time with BlipBlop, an app which satirises the pointlessness of such distractions. Here, you'll tap a large 'blip' button to accumulate 'blops', an in-game currency that merely allows you to purchase upgrades to boost your tally, and a vault to store what your auto-blip accumulates when you're not playing. It's no worse than most clicker games, in truth.



An overpass with rows of identical cars passing beneath, a train ride that evokes the crush of a cramped commute – there are striking sights, but Krillbite's message might have been better delivered in an animated short

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TIME EXTEND

The Sims

On Maxis' iconic living snapshot of '90s America

By Phil Iwaniuk

Developer Maxis **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Format** Gamecube, PC, PS2, Xbox **Release** 2000

The Oakland, California fire storm of 1991 raged for two days across 1,520 acres and destroyed over 3,000 homes. One belonged to Will Wright. In the weeks and months that followed, the *SimCity* creator involved himself with rebuilding his house, learning the fundamental principles of architecture and asking himself which components of the home were essential, and which could be bought later on.

The experience gave Wright an idea for a new game. After the release of *SimEarth* and *SimAnt* in 1990 and 1991, two titles with plenty of imagination which failed to eclipse the success of *SimCity*, Wright had three projects on his mind. Project Z would be a simulation of the ill-fated Hindenburg airship which would – mercifully – never enter production. Project Y would eventually become *SimCopter*. And Project X, drawing on Wright's experiences in architecture and home design, would become the bestselling PC game ever released.

Not that *The Sims* bore any obvious marks of genius in its early stages. Initially it tasked the player only with architectural input, challenging them to build functional and aesthetically pleasant homes and drawing inspiration from Christopher Alexander's book A Pattern Language which presented a 'function over form' argument in interior design. Once the homes were built, AI-driven characters would enter and examine them, awarding a score based on the player's architectural prowess. A prototype was developed under the name *Home Tactics: An Experimental Domestic Simulator*. Everybody, more or less, hated it.

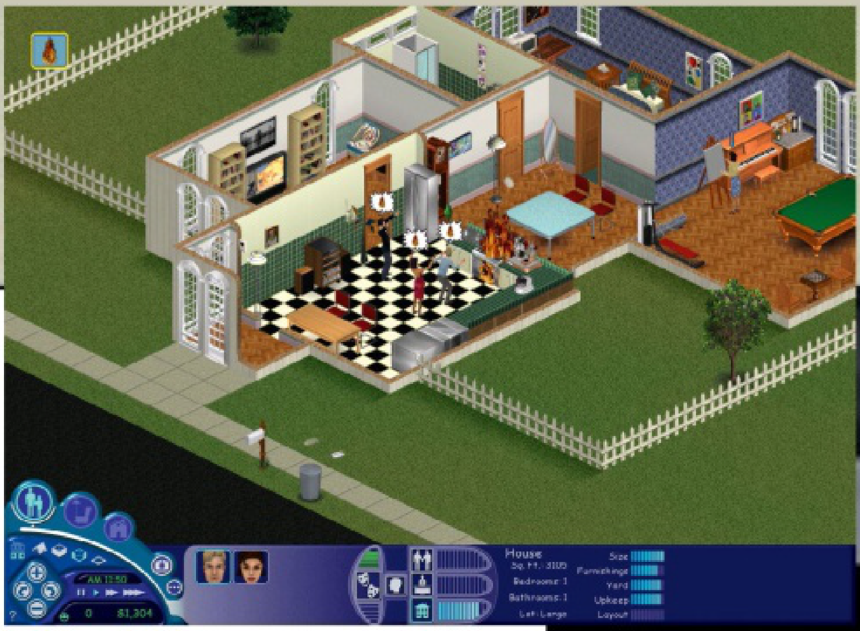
That included the marketing people at Maxis, who had not been reading A Pattern Language in their spare time nor rebuilding their homes. They didn't understand the merit or enjoyment in arranging walls and furniture and letting little computer people judge the results. Focus groups, too, hated it. Whatever magnetic pull *The Sims* would eventually have on gaming audiences in its final form, it wasn't present in 1993 when the earliest prototype was put before members of the public. In an alternate universe, that might have been the end of the story for Will Wright's odd little idea for a dollhouse game.

Its fortunes changed when Electronic Arts bought Maxis in 1997, and Luc Barthelet was appointed general manager at Maxis. Barthelet recognised the huge potential in Wright's idea, and was buoyed by a crucial repositioning the internal team had made with the game in the interim. In their efforts to design an AI that could navigate homes easily and interact with objects wherever they were placed, Wright's team inadvertently shifted the focus of the game. It wasn't simply about building homes, they realised, but about watching people live in them.

With the focus now shifted onto the characters, Wright once again drew on academic theory to establish their behaviour, just as he had with architecture. Sim behaviour is founded upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs, an influential 1943 psychological theory of human motivation. Arranged in a pyramid, it places physiological needs such as food, water, warmth and rest at the bottom and then ascends through safety needs, a sense of belonging and love, esteem, and finally self-actualisation at the top of the triangle. Only when someone has met the most basic needs, Maslow argued, can they move onto those higher up the pyramid. Using that model of human motivation, the Sim's eight needs bars were born, encapsulating the spectrum of the human condition with almost infuriating accuracy and simplicity.

As *The Sims* took on the form we now recognise, having gestated throughout most of the 1990s, it attracted a lot of buzz. Maxis employees staffing a modest station at E3 1999 to show off the game watched a line form and grow bigger and bigger, snaking through other exhibitors' stations, until they could no longer see the end of it. People were fascinated by what might happen if you made a Sim do this, or that, or kiss another Sim. The element it had been lacking for years previously – an immediately understandable imperative – it now had to an unprecedented degree. *The Sims* offered the chance to have pet people.

Such was *The Sims'* success – one million copies sold in its first month, shortly after that becoming the bestselling ▶



Among the game's most treasured elements is Jerry Martin's jazz soundtrack, which accompanied the meditative task of building a home perfectly. *The Sims'* astronomic sales mean it's some of the most listened-to music of the decade

PC game to date in 2000 – that it became part of pop culture. Its appeal was much broader than the traditional gaming audience, and marketers found that the parents and sisters of the teenage boys they'd been aiming their messaging at for years were now just as engaged with their IP. As a result, *The Sims* played a part in defining life at that specific point in time – first, because the subject matter depicted it, and second, because everyone spent so much of their actual lives playing it.

And what a specific point in time it was. Released in February 2000, it met the world just as it was discovering the Internet, but before it changed everything about the way we live our lives. It's become an accidental document of life before online shopping, smartphones or selfies, when people looked for jobs in newspapers and the jobs within them involved uniforms and workplaces. Depending on just how misanthropic your worldview may be, *The Sims* is a preserved slice of life before the untimely fall of western civilisation.

Play it now and you'll marvel at the assumptions about aspirational 'modern' life *The Sims* makes which might have been true at the time but seem quaintly anachronistic now. That an enormous stereo system represents the zenith of material gain, for example, or that Frasier Crane's apartment is the be-all and end-all in interior decor. It's striking just how prevalent music is in the world of *The Sims*, how it's the pillar of every social event. Even the Newbies, who apparently can't afford to dress themselves in anything but rags, have a stereo system on the table of their barebones bungalow.

WERE THESE OSTENSIBLY INNOCENT LITTLE PEOPLE TELLING US SOMETHING ABOUT THE SHALLOWNESS OF OUR LIVES?

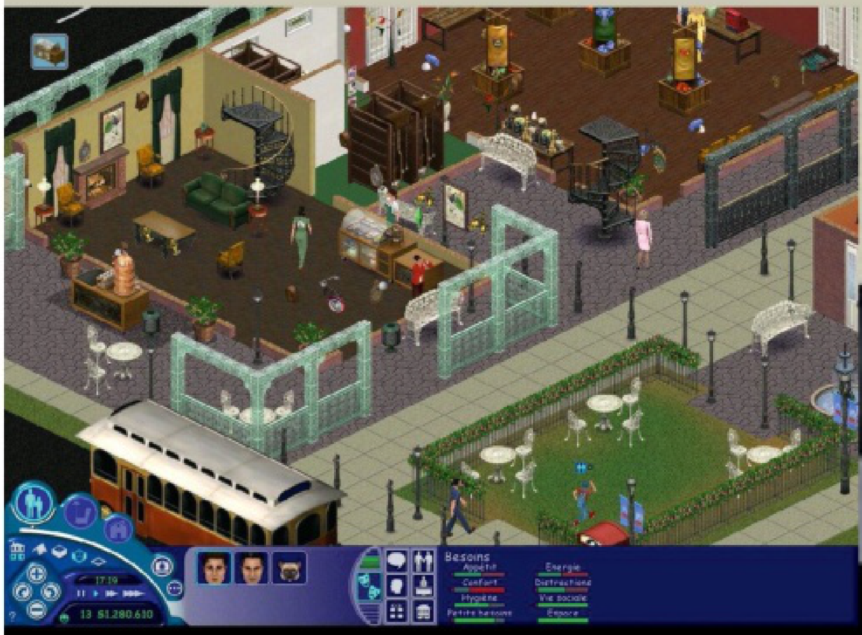
There are ideological assumptions suggested here, too. The most obvious is that material gain is the most important endeavour in life. Sims are able to forge relationships, marry, and have children, but that represents a small part of the game content compared with the multiple career paths and stacks of consumer goods available for purchase. Often, social interaction's presented as nothing more than a means to financial progression: make two new friends to achieve a promotion, or go to work with your social bar replenished. We're shown the benefit of socialising to further a Sim's career, but never given a social reward for succeeding professionally. In fact, your neighbours might even stop by to poke fun at your furniture if you don't get ahead financially.

Criticism of an increasingly consumerist society was a hot topic at the turn of the millennium, and some players at the time interpreted *The Sims* as a comment on capitalism and the American Dream. Were these ostensibly innocent little people actually telling us something about the shallowness of our lives? According to Wright, they were not. *The Sims'* atmosphere of almost oppressive Americana, conveyed in everything from the white picket-fenced

Nearly all pre-built houses have a pool. Players discovered they could drown their charges by removing ladders in Build mode

MY TWO DADS

The Sims **is the second game to feature Sims.** ***SimCopter*** **was the first to coin the phrase, and it inadvertently paved the way for Wright's later title to feature same-sex relationships. One programmer, Jacques Servin, added an Easter egg which caused male Sims to appear in swimwear, hold hands and kiss on certain dates. However a bug somewhere in the code caused this to happen far more than intended. Servin was later fired for the stunt, after which Maxis faced homophobia accusations for the dismissal. So years later, when it turned out the earliest design documents for** ***The Sims*** **included the potential for same-sex romance options, the team were allowed to pursue it. One of the first mainstream gaming depictions of gay relationships was born, and it reached an audience of millions.**



Later expansions would offer Sims a downtown area where they could eat out, a university, pets and the infamous vibrating bed which introduced WooHoo, an all-ages euphemism for sex

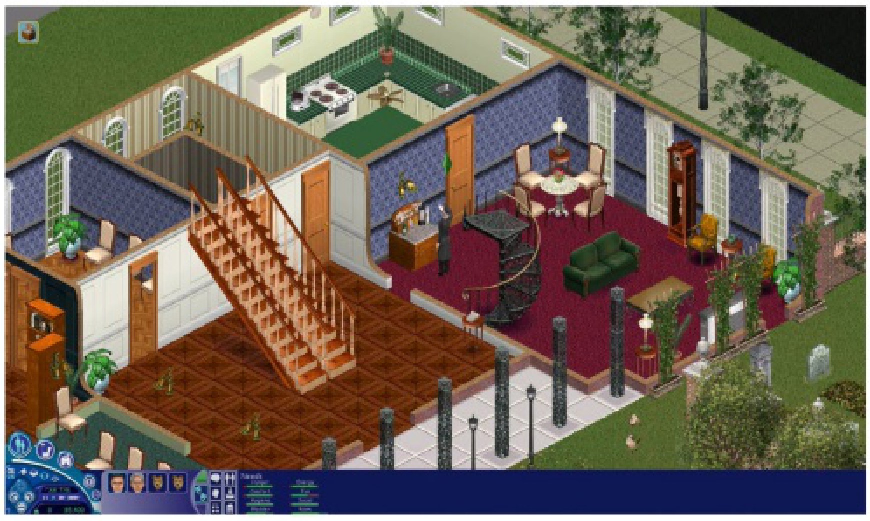
streets of its suburbs to the mid-century shopping-commercial music in Buy mode, was just a way to make the world make sense for audiences in 14 different language territories, the creator explained. Wright called it "American Television Culture," a kind of hyper-real vision of '90s America that anyone who'd seen Friends, Seinfeld, Frasier or the like would immediately grasp. Whatever the intentions at the time, the effect of living inside American Television Culture for a few hours in 2019 is akin to watching an Adam Curtis documentary.

In another bid to make *The Sims* appeal to international audiences, Maxis developed a fictional language, Simlish. After initially experimenting with fractured Ukranian (also the basis for the slang used by the teenage monsters in A Clockwork Orange), Fijian and Tagalog, Wright's team decided that having Sims speak in nonsense made more sense than having them say anything meaningful in an obscure language. An effect that's perhaps accidental is that Simlish deepens the feeling of voyeurism as you play *The Sims*. It keeps you at arm's length from your pets, however involved you might be in the minutiae of their lives. You understand the gestures and intonations as they communicate with each other, and occasionally imploringly to you. But you're never there with them, instead watching from a distance as a kind of foreign visitor.

The Sims' legacy might have gone in any number of directions. In the aftermath of its chart-topping success in 2000, it seemed inevitable that the industry would be overrun by imitators. But approximating something as all-encompassing as *The Sims* proved all but impossible, and as Maxis retained the monopoly on modern life simulators it began flooding the market all on its own, with expansion packs promising new activities and items. These proved as commercially successful as they did controversial, with some looking harshly on such aggressive monetisation of content aimed, at least in part, at a young audience.

Perhaps it's the proliferation of those expansion packs that diminishes *The Sims'* reputation. Seven for the first *Sims* game, eight for its sequel, an unquantifiable flood of additional paid content for later games, but all the while the fundamental experience remained basically unchanged. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, A Pattern Language and the player as god-king of suburbia. ■

Decor trends have moved on since ***The Sims'*** **release, giving a frozen-in-time atmosphere to the homes of the original, and the pre-Internet lives of their owners**



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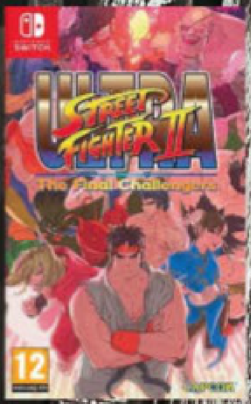
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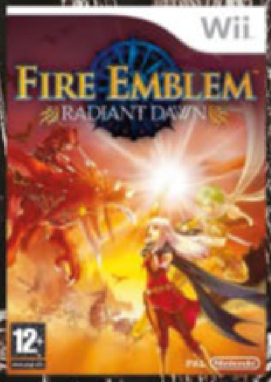
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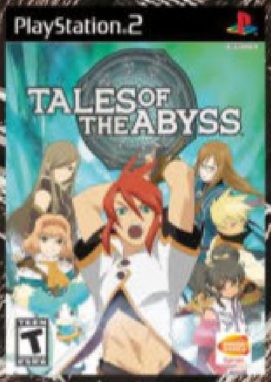
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A progress report on the games we just can't quit

Red Dead Redemption 2

Developer Rockstar Studios **Publisher** Rockstar Games **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

With perfect timing, Rockstar announced the PC version of its western masterpiece as we were mulling over building a new PC, and the thought of making the best-looking games ever made even prettier is all the incentive we need to get our wallets out, and our anti-static wristbands on.

Yet Rockstar's games are a curse on PC. Built not just for today but for the future, and with a sprawling settings menu letting us tinker with everything from water physics to tree fidelity, shadow resolution and three different types of anti-aliasing, this is either a tinkerer's wet dream or a perfectionist's nightmare. We lock the framerate to 30, slide almost everything up to the highest setting, and try to forget about it.

This hasn't been the smoothest of launches, however, and at the time of writing Rockstar is still patching out stability and performance issues. We have a running battle with HDR on Windows 10, and things aren't helped by our video settings being reset to the defaults whenever Rockstar issues a patch. But once it's up and running, this is clearly the definitive version of one of the games of the generation. On an ultrawide monitor, its already-stunning vistas become simply breathtaking. And while we never really struggled with the controls, moving to mouse and keyboard, with the option of higher framerates if we're prepared to sacrifice fidelity, means Arthur Morgan feels a good deal snappier in the hands.

Well, eventually. Getting out of the snowbound prologue is a pain for anyone replaying the game – and this is our fourth time through it. One of the first products of a burgeoning mod community is a save file that lets you skip ahead to after the gang's first move east, and we devour it. It's hard to perfect your HDR settings beneath a blanket of cloud, after all.

And with all that finally done, we find that the game has lost none of its lustre. We've still yet to be taken in by the online component – while Rockstar has regularly updated the mode since launch, that old west setting simply doesn't afford the same sort of excitement that GTA Online's inherent consumer-capitalism does with each new update.

But no matter. Specialist PC media have struggled with their *RDR2* coverage; after all, it's not easy to run the critical rule over a game that's been subjected to every hot take under the baking New Austin sun. Not us. As we ride out across a sun-dappled plain, resplendent in a ludicrous 32:9 aspect ratio, we feel at home, at peace, even as the sound of distant gunfire grows slowly louder. It's great to be back. ■

#341

January 3